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*Publication of this issue was supported by  
Ministry of Culture and Information of Republic of Serbia  
and City Department for Culture of Novi Sad*



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# LITERARY LINKS OF THE MATICA SRPSKA

## 6–7/2020

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ISIDORA SEKULIĆ

## THE VLAOVIĆES

Several branched and once powerful and prominent families crammed their family burial plots almost to the very surface. They're gone now. For the last thirty years, the parish has been planning to "empty", dig up, and resell them. But, the Vlaovićes' plot, well that's something beyond some town council and its decision. Indeed, the town council is afraid of the dead Vlaovićes! If you peek through the cracks in the stone edges of the grave, you can catch a glimpse of a corner of a metal coffin. This coffin, judging by the corner, isn't a mere coffin but an entire little house. As it should be for a mighty figure like Marko Vlaović, a man with a Roman-like, large square-shaped head, who was the last to lie in the Vlaovićes' family grave in the town cemetery. However, it should be noted that the Vlaovićes aren't townsfolk and that their actual family plot, which is much bigger, is located in their village. How did some of the Vlaovićes come to settle in town? They didn't. They were all tied to the village because of their land, tradition, an exclusive and passionate fondness for country life, the endless freedom enjoyed by large landowners in villages, the colorful and crazy quirks of the landlords, which only their village is willing to tolerate, and even boasts about it. The thing is, one of the Vlaovićes had an argument with the village priest and decided to purchase a grave in a nearby town, out of sheer spite; and this Vlaović, who was the eldest at the time, gave orders that all the Vlaovićes are to be taken to the town cemetery "until priest Tima leaves this world". "Once priest Tima shoves off," this stubborn Vlaović would say, "we'll move everyone back to the village, to our cemetery. I swear, we'll need half the cemetery in the village!" Of course, priest Tima finally shoved off; but by then, all the Vlaovićes had shoved off as well, and they never got the chance to move their deceased back to the village. So now, there are Vlaovićes in two cemeteries, but no more living.

Until recently, there were still two living descendants, a sister and brother, both odd characters. They lived on the remainder of the land, with the remainder of the family pride and defiance. One might say that these two Vlaovićes lived neither in town nor the village, but a grove within a forest preserve that still belonged to them and brought in quite a nice income, especially from bird hunting. Neither Leksa nor her brother looked after the family grave in town. Still, the township only attempted to say that this abandoned grave must be dug up. It was only after Josif had passed away, and Leksa, the last descendant of the family, became completely unhinged that the township grabbed a shovel and mattock and swooped down on the family grave. Only to be unexpectedly interrupted by old Mr. Avram. The old, very old Mr. Avram, ever since he stopped going outside of town, is known for having once travelled the world and being a big spender, and when he squandered all his money and a friend asked him, "What would you do, uncle Avram, if by some chance you now had the estate you once did?" he calmly answered, "I'd spend it." The elderly Mr. Avram was once a great trader and seafarer who originated from Herzegovina. He was one of the early Herzegovinian settlers in Bačka, who sold merchandise without a shop or stand, transported goods in small caravans and ships, sat for months in Venice and Rome, where they completed both their trading and banking, and made so much money that they had enough left over for public endowments and foundations. Truth be told, uncle Avram had nothing left over, not even for old age, let alone some foundation, but what he did have were the memories of his old friendship and the times he spent in the home of his friends, the Vlaovićes, especially the home of Marko Vlaović. And so, this uncle Avram now stood in front of the parish – even though he was living off the financial aid of the township – and shouted as loudly as he could for a man his age, "Vacate? Who dares to 'vacate' this grave, that's what I'd like to know! The parish? I don't know anyone! No one can ever 'vacate' Marko Vlaović! Certainly not while I'm still alive... Is there anyone else who can say they were a friend and blood brother to the Vlaovićes, who had the key to their home to go in and out as they like, to take whatever they want... I still remember, even though others don't, who the Vlaovićes were and how much they were respected! I know what they had and how much they gave and left to the people... I know their furniture, and horses, and silver and wine... I know their collection of icons! I still have the piano, which Josif Vlaović paid a fortune for, in that 'rathole' of mine... To my sorrow, I outlived the father and the son and the grandchildren, but maybe it's a good thing, because now I can stop you from disturbing my blood brother Marko and my benefactors, his children... If someone is set on dying and lying in a large grave, and

the township has no space left – the council is lying about this! – here, they can lie in the piano, there's enough room for three or four, and the wood will hold up nicely, longer than the walls in the town graves... Here you are, gentlemen, it would even make me happy if the parish didn't take the piano after I die, since the parish needs everything, and nothing is ever enough... the parish wants to vacate Marko Vlaović! Do you good and clever people hear this! Rats and the dwarfs of today are crawling on Marko and they can't hold a candle to him... Ha! ha! ha! Do you know, you rats and dwarfs, who the Vlaovićes were?! The district court renders a judgement, but Marko reverses it, he has the last word!... A priest gives sermons and Stefan Vlaović gives the orders, even if he doesn't go to church!... Officers with rifles and calpacs with hackle feathers have to enter a room of a killer and tie him up, and they're afraid; but Stefan Vlaović goes in barehanded and bareheaded, and takes the killer's gun as if taking a doll from a sleeping child... That's right, when they were around, in this old Serbian barge there was order, and pride, and shame... and, and, and beauty, yes there was beauty when Josip played the piano, and Marko, his grandfather, rode a horse, and visited everyone and gave to them!... No more! You, Avram, have died along with them! The Vlaovićes lowered the anchor into the grave and now there are no more proper Serbs, or wealthy men, or proud men... And these rats no longer mention the Vlaovićes as patrons and benefactors, but talk only about their peculiarities, their darkness and downfall... On top of that, they come with mattocks and shovels to dig them up! Pfft! Rats, rodents, dwarfs!"

The Vlaović family was the true Vlaović lineage because, by living in a village, they outlasted the townsmen. And, like all long-standing families, they left behind both good and bad, to be mentioned in one way or another; but, surprisingly, they were remembered mostly through dark romantic stories, the history of their degeneration. People either talked about the crazy whims of the wealthy landlords or the manias of eccentrics and mental cases. Perhaps this was a way in which the cold and petty provincial town took revenge for not being able to measure up to them, neither physically, spiritually nor financially; no one could match their sense of culture, just as no one could match their tragic downfall. The Vlaovićes left behind endowments and buildings, as well as many children they had set on the right path, but this is rarely mentioned or remembered. Subsequent generations of all those who leave behind money as proof of their merits, meet with strange dual fates. Their money and property have no biography; no one asks about their origin or quality. Memorial services are held for the money – even services no one attends – and each year, at least ten important names are signed below the total sum of this money. And those who

accumulated the money, God knows how, but certainly with difficulty, have biographies, and they are most often shocking or comic, providing excellent entertainment for the next generations. As if it were not a rule and standard behavior on this Earth for all families to be drained by the last ridiculous and pathetic descendants! This is the law of the overall history of mankind: all that is strong and great ends in tragedy or comedy, because there are no other endings but these. And the observer is often some useless generation, which doesn't have the courage to know that under another and new name, it, the generation, comes from those unfortunates and wretches, but boasts with their money and uses it to get an education, and eventually digs over their graves.

Leksa, Leksandra Vlaović, outlived all the Vlaovićes and grew old as the unmarried sister of the last Vlaović bachelor with a fine biblical name of Josif. Towards the end of her life, she lived in a house once used to accommodate workers in a thicket the family once owned, for which she paid rent with the money she made from a small forest preserve, her only source of income. Leksa demonstrated the strength and pride that characterized the Vlaovićes in the past, as well as all the quirkiness of the last Vlaovićes. And when Josif was still among the living, no one had ever heard her cry out in pain or complain, or seen her try to find some way to change her fate – Josif, the wretch, beat his sister savagely once a month – and to her dying day, she never told stories about the Vlaovićes, not about their fame and power, nor about their downfall and shame. With a crooked shoulder, perhaps even from hardship, always flustered from the silent suffering and the fear, withered and grey, completely withdrawn, she was but a shadow of the Vlaovićes, an irrelevant, final trace of a whole line of strong and robust men. When he was still up and about, Mr. Avram would see her on occasion and then quickly hide and watch. Always the same: she would lean on a tree, clenching her fists at all times, looking around as if she were waiting for someone. Avram thought to himself, “This was a battle of strong blood and a strong spirit, and one devoured the other... The Vlaovićes had neglected Leksa... They never valued women and didn't understand that Leksa was not just a woman, but also a human being... Leksa could have proudly been the last Vlaović!... Dear God! How does it happen, and when does the most important thing in a strong family weaken and break... I remember, once, on a ship to Venice, observing the ship's rope-maker. He was weaving a rope, singing, his hands filled with hemp, the rope was twisting around, thick, firm, longer and longer. And then suddenly, the hemp started slipping away, the roper couldn't hold it, only a meager twine was left twisting in his hands, and then it broke, and the rope-maker was left with plenty of hemp but there was only a piece of string coming out of it... That was

how, in the case of the Vlaovićes, only Leksa remained, and now the real Leksa has turned into a piece of string..."

Leksa's and Josif's great-grandfather, Kornel Vlaović, as the name itself reveals, was born to parents who chose a gentleman's name for their son. Kornel Vlaović was and remained a resident of the village, but when it came to literacy and ideas about what his duties in the village should be, he was as progressive as the townspeople. In the village, they called him townsman and father. And in the church, a saint. Whether or not his piety was actually saintly in nature, or merely a kind of discipline and type of esthetics, no one knows. Besides, even the latter would be plenty in those times. In some ways, Kornel Vlaović ran his household monastically. From the Saturday vigil (which, of course, in the village was held only in his imagination) to the end of the service on Sunday, in his home only whispers were allowed and not a single harsh word was to be uttered. On Saturday evenings, all family members were washed and combed, like it or not. Married couples in the household slept apart on Saturday nights. Daughters and mothers were separated, "to leash their tongues and end the foolish talk for a bit". Before the icon of the patron saint, in the "great room", a vigil lamp was lit and kept burning by a woman who is "pure". There was a large vigil lamp burning bright before the icon of the Lord of Sabaoth, which needed to be replenished with oil throughout the night by the woman on duty, as if her life depended on it. "The night is holy. By day you can even forget... Only a male family member can light the large vigil lamp, after that, women can replenish it." Once, when something "citizefied" happened in the "great room", Kornel Vlaović had that part of the house torn down and built another "great room", which was separated from the rest of the house by a hallway and an adjacent shed, where everything needed for the celebration of a religious holiday was kept. Only a corpse was allowed to spend the night in the "great room".

Marko was Kornel's only son, after having two girls. Marko married a destitute but beautiful girl, and built a house of his own. It too was a low-level home with many rooms, all leading one into the other. "Don't ever close the doors! I want to live in the whole house, and not like some snail that crawls into its shell." Marko furnished his home with all the necessary, and unnecessary, luxury items. He was the first to order "roller shutters", "porcelain", silver spoons, knife and fork holders, and had an incredible collection of brushes and detergents for keeping the house tidy and clean. Marko was a large man. He sat in special chairs. His fist was as big as a mace. When he needed to pick up a goose feather to write, he had to hold it between his nails. His wife came barely up to his waist. He loved her, but never sought her advice

about anything. “You’ve got plenty of work to do around the house, and when you hear talk about other matters, it’s better that you leave on your own because, you could get all confused if you keep listening.” Marko Vlaović was also obsessed with the housekeeping, having a nice spotless house and furniture, sparkling dishes, well-cared-for suits and laundry. However, his meals were quite simple and moderate, like all those who drink more than they eat, and he didn’t care much for the kitchen. But when it came to clean rooms, he was worse than a woman, a real harridan. The boys in the family had to scrub floors because “a woman’s hand can’t even hold a wooden spoon properly, and a woman’s eye can never tell if a glass is clean. A wooden floor needs a man’s hand and a man’s eye”. So, the boys scrubbed the floors, but with soapsuds to which Marko added something, specially ordered, that made the floorboards tighten and become as smooth as glass. When the floors were dry, Marko would squat in the end room, grab a rug and throw it, and it had to slide across the floor, through several rooms, until it hit the wall. If it stopped before reaching the wall, he would raise a rumpus. His suit was brushed by two women: one of them would go over it with a brush and the other would remove tiny feathers and dust particles with the tips of her fingers. Once in a while, Marko would throw down a white sheet and step on it to check if the women had done a good job of cleaning the soles of his shoes. They had to scrub and wipe “the other side” of everything in the house. “Scrub the other side of that brat as well! Understand? What are you looking at, turn him inside out and scrub!” They had to air out both wooden and iron objects. “Air out that cane! What are you laughing about? You’ll see, it’ll look as good as new afterwards.”

Outside the house, he was crazy about horses. When he drove those horses, screams were heard both in the carriage and around the carriage. He rode them like a Cossack, and sometimes his enormous figure would burst in on a horse into the hallway of his home, or the hallway of the district hospital, to which he donated money frequently and visited even more frequently. Because Marko, humungous Marko, was afraid of illness. A part of this fear was innate, but his doctor would also reproach him, because he liked and drank *rakia* too much. The *rakia* was homebrewed in his household. It was used for cooking and even sprinkled through a fine sieve over cookies. Marko was afraid, as he would say, not of death, but of being ill, “because when you become ill, you have to change all your habits, and I’d rather be dead.” He would visit the hospital, he used to say, because he wanted to see what it was like to be ill.

Marko had three sons. All three as good-looking as their mother, but spoiled by comfort, and willful. Kornel Vlaović warned his son

Marko, “You’re overdoing it with all the comforts. You know, when a provincial family is overly refined, something is always ruined, either the mirrors and chairs or the sons and daughters.” Each time a son was born, Marko would make out a will. He educated his children, travelled with them to Italy on two occasions, and made certain they were subscribed to a library and newspapers. There were more newspapers in Marko’s house than in the town’s reading room. His eldest son graduated from a school for merchants, asked his father for some start-up capital, went to the Levant, did some trading, but then died of malaria. Marko was in despair. He made the journey “to bring him home on his back if necessary,” but failed. The middle son became deaf after falling off a horse and joined a monastery where, as a good economist, he did many good things. But, he drank too much and didn’t even reach middle age. Following the death of his second son, Marko signed over a good part of his estate to a Serbian institution in order to bring good luck to his only son. Everyone congratulated him, but he only shook his head gloomily, “I have one son, and two endowments. This smells like Koliva.”<sup>1</sup> The youngest son, Stefan, was a gifted young man, but extremely quick-tempered. Father and son, two Vlaovićes, and not a day went by without an argument. The mother would turn pale instantly and plead with her husband to mind his words and actions. “Don’t forget, Marko, we only have one left, for heaven’s sake!” And Marko seemed to calm down. “Yes, one, but a Vlaović. Good or bad, he’ll always be one in a thousand.” On one occasion, the father and son got into an argument over extravagant spending. Only, the son was the one who reproached the father for overspending. Harsh words were exchanged. The next day, as if on purpose, Marko spent a large sum of money on a third riding horse. Stefan lost his temper, “Just so you know, death will be the one to ride him!” and he grabbed a rifle, burst into the barn and killed him on the spot, the most beautiful horse of the three, whom Marko named Swallow. Marko then grabbed his son’s arm and beat it with the buttstock so hard that Stefan had to go to the hospital for several minor operations and treatment that lasted for some time. Nevertheless, things between the Vlaovićes ended chivalrously. The father promised that the people in their village and the town would never find out what really happened to Swallow. “And if anyone ever asks you, for as long as you live you will say that you were giving sugar to the horse, and that you didn’t know that sugar is given to a horse using your palm, not your fingers... And remember, men fight like dogs, but they make peace like men.”

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s Note: A dish based on boiled wheat that is used in Eastern Orthodox rituals to commemorate the dead.

Stefan excelled in all schools. But when his father passed away, he left law school with practically only one exam remaining. “For God’s sake Stefan, don’t you regret it?” “I don’t. Enough with the schools, the real learning starts now.” He buried his head in books and studied on his own. He began developing odd mannerisms and turning into a strange character indeed. The impulsiveness disappeared; he possessed the calmness of wise men. He became almost maniacally righteous and lived the simple life to the point of eccentricity. “I don’t care for husbandry. The estate is bound to suffer, but it’s only fair. We’ve owned so much, and still do.” He was happy to help the less fortunate with money, employment and, being a lawyer, legal advice. The elders used to say, “It’s like Kornel Vlaović lives in Stefan... But even when Kornel was alive, there has never been such justice, or ever... May God give him health and a long life.” Nonetheless, Stefan was thin and frail, and seemed even more so because he was almost as tall as his father. His face suddenly began to change. His handsome head was acquiring bird-like features. His mother hovered over him; she had turned into a saint from all the fasting and prayers. But she was happy. Her Stefan had an enchanting effect on everyone in their community. As if by magic, his righteousness, and powerful, wise words resolved old disputes between inveterate feuders and, on several occasions, saved desperate people from making reckless decisions. When he became head of the household, in the Vlaović home the wife was given a say for the first time. Marija, Stefan Vlaović’s wife, was allowed to tell her husband about things she had noticed in the house and on the land. She had her own chair in the stacida of the church and didn’t have to stand by her husband, and even went when he didn’t attend services. She managed the household on her own. The entire household, with the exception of the hen house. Stefan Vlaović began to raise fowl, domestic birds, and developed a liking for them. “The world has completely forgotten that they’re birds, God’s birds, and not just a roast or bits and pieces for making soup.” Stefan was withdrawing more and more from his duties as the head of the household and landowner. He was in his room with his books; or, quite the opposite, in the preserve with the birds; or at his big hen house, which was teeming with life and clucking birds. Stefan loved music with a passion. He didn’t play any instruments, but he invited musicians to his home and made the decision that both his children would learn to play an instrument: his son, the violin, and his daughter, the piano. That was when the superb and expensive piano was purchased. The one that ended up in uncle Avram’s “rathole”, and which he offered to be used as a coffin. Still, everyone noticed that as Stefan listened to music, a grimace of pain contorted his face and his body seemed to twitch. “I have sensitive *hearing*... No one can know

what that's like, unless they're fortunate or unfortunate enough to have it. I hear God in the music, but if it's only slightly too loud, off-key or scratchy, I shake all over and must leave." He also asked that the music be played quietly. "Quieter, quieter still, as quiet as a ray of light."

Bit by bit, at first unnoticeably, Stefan sold off a good portion of the land, and gave away a considerable amount of money to people without collateral. And then, without warning, he spent a substantial cash sum on a forest that was, unsurprisingly, quite a distance away from his home and village, amidst other forests. Now he was definitely leaving his home and withdrawing into seclusion. He would stay away for two months at a time. However, not because of good husbandry, but because the maniac within manifested himself more and more. "Stop knocking down trees, you're frightening my birds!" Even the necessary clearing of trees drove him insane. He would give the loggers impossible orders. The forest was growing wild, suffocating itself and violently breaking, but it was all the same to Stefan. "Stop banging with that axe, I can't bear to watch a frightened, crying bird. Are you deaf, can't you hear the cries, the horrible screeching?" Branches were cut and dry twigs collected only along the forest edge and this was practically Stefan's only income from "logging". The silence and mystery of the forest filled him with delight and brought him endless joy.

Marija and Stefan had two children: Leksandra and Josif. Leksa possessed more strength and spirit than her brother, but the brother was more refined and talented than her. The cultural skills of the Vlaovićes developed swiftly over the last two or three generations, but the family, as an entity, and the land were deteriorating rapidly. This is often the case. Especially among poor, smaller nations and communities. Cultural awareness suddenly turns into passionate enthusiasm, and simply wears people down. This was precisely the case with Leksa and Josif: they possessed the zest and talent for cultural ascent, for beauty. But the family itself was fading. And, as is often the case when a family is dissolving, the final remains of the male traits surge into the girl – where they cannot develop properly, naturally or practically – and stand tall for the final time in some sort of defiant resistance, or maniacal pride, only to perish in the end. Once, when Leksa had just turned fifteen, they had to tie her up in a carriage and bring her home from town. She was set on going to school like Josif. She was screaming hysterically, "You're killing me!" "For God's sake child, you can't go to school like Josif, they don't accept girls at that school." "Then let me learn a trade. I want to be a gardener, to grow flowers and have tulips all year round, to be surrounded by their smell and give away seeds." "We don't have a gardening school here. Leksa, my dear," her mother tried to calm her. "I'll go where they do. I know where they have one

and about everything they teach there.” Stefan caressed his daughter, “Don’t you see that a trade is exactly what I wanted for you, when I bought you the piano, and arranged for the town teacher to give you lessons at home? You’ll learn to play the piano, and that’s both a trade and a skill.” “I like to listen to others playing the piano, but I don’t want to play... This is not the time for the Vlaovićes to be playing... Don’t you see that!... Josif should also be learning something other than the violin.”

The mother and daughter reconciled at home, sad and troubled. Marija Vlaović knew that her daughter’s assessment of their situation and downfall was quite true, and sheds bitter tears, complaining that she doesn’t understand her husband or her son. “The house, the land, everything is withering away, and it’s all the same to them... As if they’re sleeping, or in some sort of trance... Leksa, everything we have is weak: the head of our household, our horse, the wheat. Both in the house and the barn, things are breaking down. Not a day goes by without something breaking and falling to the ground as if the spirit had left it... The big wardrobe is worn and wobbly; yesterday, the ladder fell apart beneath one of the workers; the polish is peeling off the chairs as if they were sitting in hot water.” “Too bad that piano doesn’t crack in half, mother, so we can stop making fools of ourselves in front of other people. We sell things that should never be sold, people don’t take their hats off anymore for the Vlaovićes, and what do we have in the house? Slackers! Josif beats on that piano like a madman, while father shuts his eyes and sleeps awake.” “No Leksa, don’t talk like that, Josif plays beautifully, don’t you hear it, don’t you care?” “Neither do I hear or care, because I know we should all be doing something else... Looks like you’re sleeping as well!... *Our family name is losing ground!*” shouted Leksa. “You need me, the youngest, to tell you that! We need to save the Vlaović name, to work hard for it... The *Vlaovićes*, that’s our piano and our music, if you don’t know that by now, may you not know anything ever again so that this torture can finally come to an end!... Are we ever going to get back on our feet, mother, that’s what I’m asking you, tell me!”

Josif was a true gentleman and artist. Everything about him would become the fashion. He didn’t attend as many schools as his father, but he was more knowledgeable, and more capable. The crude creative force of rural landowners had finally turned into talent and developed sensitivity. People have no idea how expensive these talented sons of former farmers and rural landowners are! They either bloom on some branch far removed from the tree, or the tree falls to the ground, rots, but a beautiful branch coils out of a knot, and shivers, until it becomes weary from the loneliness and the shivering, and withers away. Josif

was a very gifted musician. First, he played the violin, and he played for his father almost “as quietly as a ray of light”. But Stefan Vlaović would trim his nails shorter still, “So you don’t scratch the strings, and better find the spot where it sings.” After Leksa stopped playing the piano, Josif took over, and he made great progress. People from town and neighboring places used to invite him to play for them. He hated going into town. One day, he had to ride through town and stay there for a few hours. When he returned to the village, he took his quill and wrote this on a piece of paper, “Minutes from a human gathering... All present... Children dawdling along walls and gates until sundown. Adults torturing their loved ones, to find some meaning in their own lives. It is as if the streets are hiding something as they move forward and spiral into the earth and disappear. Moldy shops. In the shops, owners, apprentices, and customers bitterly arguing because they keep missing some money, the sums are wrong. A few blurred law office and barber shop windows have the same yellow blinds. Petty bureaucracy, cut off from the large apparatus, with no other future but tomorrow. Two ‘upscale’ families are also present; setting the tone and making sure they impress someone with something and pierce their hearts with envy... Everything is moldy. No real scramble for landed property, or a poor man’s sense of pride for his home and family name, to the last living descendant. It is as though everyone is serving a prison sentence. They don’t love anything with passion and joy. The children are looking to leave as soon as possible, either by finishing school or getting married. The hands and faces that appear in the distance, as shutters are banged shut at night, seem to be completely impassive, as if they don’t care about this night, or the next day, or the days to come...” This piece of paper is a small testimony to the fact that Josif possessed a certain flair for writing. Nevertheless, he could never become a writer. The will to write something, to write what he wrote, lasted only as long as the feeling of uneasy disgust after his visit to town, which he couldn’t stand. “Now I’ll spend the entire day sitting next to my hen house, with my nice hens and ducklings that I may forget the town and the honorable gathering of its residents.” He would press the gentle chicks to his chest to keep them warm and lull them to sleep and raise his finger to his mouth, gesturing for everyone to be quiet. Later, he would sit at the piano for hours and play wonderfully, truly anything he wanted, and all that was written for the piano.

Leksa was distraught. She was helping her mother with housework but moving as if in a daze. Something else was gnawing at her. By some strong male instinct, she sensed the status that the Vlaovićes once enjoyed, and she almost despised her father, and then later her brother. Leksa struggled with her character. The romanticism of an unhappy

youth and the romanticism of a family's lassitude and the tragedy of an inferior and neglected family member were suffocating this girl with bird-like features, like her father, a girl as thin as a reed. The man in Leksa couldn't step to the fore. No one listened to her. No one respected her or expected anything of her. She would spend all day, be it summer or winter, wandering around the preserve, running away from her home and those in it. "It's cold Leksa, go home," someone would say. "I don't feel the cold." Uncle Avram, when he still came by, would ask, "What are you doing Leksa?" "I'm cutting wood and cleaning the house. They don't let me do anything else." "Why are you always walking through the fields? People are talking." "They can't be saying anything bad because I'm not doing anything wrong, I'm a Vlaović... And I have to get away from Josif and his piano. So much thunder and not a drop of rain... I don't understand how you, uncle Avram, can't see what's happening to us." Leksa had survived, in her own family, two difficult sentimental defeats. She once adored and respected the father she later despised. But this same father took her out of school and then, it became obvious that he loved and respected Josif more. Leksa once loved her brother, perhaps even more than her father, and she would hover over him, shower him with tenderness, boast about him to others. She waited for Josif to pay at least some attention to her. "If only he could see her as a human being, a person, to have a proper conversation with her once in a while, perhaps do something for her, send her to gardening school himself". Josif was a Vlaović, he didn't have much respect for the female members of the family, and on top of everything else, he had his inner, very closed life. He had a closer connection to his father, but only through the music and the hen house. Josif had somewhat of an attitude of complacency characteristic of talented people, the familiar selfishness of a talented man who is his own best excuse for everything. Poor Leksa, always the doomsayer. Somehow, Leksa was called to pursue some unnamed ideal, a distant goal, like a man would, and she was born to sacrifice herself for something heroic. But as such, she was born too late into the Vlaović nest. And this is why she was living with clenched fists, with the energy of ominous anticipation, which is a type of revenge of those who are unhappy and irrelevant. When Josip went away, Stefan Vlaović turned to his daughter, giving her a little more attention and love. But it was too late. Clenched fists, a hardened mind, and the pride of a being that has lost everything, was all that was left of Leksa Vlaović.

After Josif returned, the music brought the father and son even closer. One would play, the other would listen, and everything else was far away. They didn't ask where the food was coming from, or who spreads their bed sheets, or who in sickness creates what they seek.

The last flower of the weary Vlaovićes – art. What does art need to exist? How is art born?... Of course, the villagers didn't understand art and its problems, but music is music. And the village came to love music and learned to differentiate and better appreciate its enchanting quality. When they heard music playing “quietly” at the Vlaović home, passersby would almost tiptoe by the house.

Stefan Vlaović has been living with his chronic illness for some time now, the disease of the blood, a painless disease with which he, like with an old friend, slowly descended down the stairs of this life. There wasn't much the doctors could do. “I don't think I'll ever get a patient like this one again. Those two down in the village, despite the music, seem like they're actually preparing for death. I try to hide something and Stefan immediately says, ‘Don't, I'm not afraid of anything, I know what's coming.’” Either because of the quarrel with priest Tima or his personal conviction, Stefan Vlaović had long before stopped going to church. The township held this against him. “Oh, Mr. Stefan, at least go for the sake of the people, who look up to your family.” “My wife goes to church regularly. I'm religious in a different way. I'm afraid of God and, believe me, nothing more is needed.” It seems it really was enough. A few members of Stefan's household, some cousins and servants, simply sanctified themselves by looking to their master's fascination with music and his love for birds, and listening to his words, “God should be feared”. And just as Stefan Vlaović feared God even though he didn't go to church, he collected icons even though he didn't cross himself or pray to God before them. He added to the old collection of icons with understanding and appreciation.

This calm and quiet Stefan Vlaović was becoming more and more of a burden to his daughter. Leksa was full of resistance against death. She was hoping that one day things would change fundamentally, that they would begin some sort of endeavour which would last a long time, in which she would play a major role, take her revenge and save what needed to be saved. She, Leksa Vlaović. This is why she wasn't too sad when her father passed away. But, on the day of her father's funeral, Josif had some sort of strange attack: fear gripped his body and soul, he was trembling, afraid of something, letting out muffled cries. Was this a glint of Marko Vlaović's fear? Essentially, the last unfortunate Vlaović had begun to branch out to all his ancestors who have set out to carry the Vlaovićes to the West and into the twilight. He discovered that *rakia* did him good, warded off his attacks. He ordered that vigil lamps be lit at all times. He turned one room into a small museum, hung all the icons, and sent for a painter to ask him if he can paint frescoes on the walls. Then, one day, he decided he would get married. But he spoke quite unreasonably and fantastically about the girl who

would supposedly become his wife. And then, he suddenly felt an urge to change his place of residence, to flee somewhere. He asked Leksa for money and threatened her if she didn't find the money he needed to go to Italy. "I'll be able to see frescoes, and my girl is there." He suffered another serious attack and took to his bed. For some families and lineages, weaknesses and illnesses can be the same as war or hunger for healthy people: the young and the strong rise. But it seems that the Vlaovićes had begun to approach the point of non-creation with Marko's fear of illness and Stefan's courage at death's door. The shackles of his heritage and descent began to weigh heavily on Stefan. He suddenly began to ruthlessly dispose of and destroy everything that represented the chain of generations, the deep-rooted traditions of the Vlaovićes. One day, he simply threw the collection of icons out in the yard, and then gave them away to a young village priest. When he found out that the priest had brought them back into the house through a back entrance, he became enraged and raised havoc, breaking everything in the house. That night, his mother became very feeble. She lived only long enough to see her son smashing and giving away furniture, dishes, even clothing. "I'll even give away your fur coat; you'll feel better right away." When Marija Vlaović was buried a year later, the brother and sister were left in an almost empty house. That was when Josif's melancholy emerged full force. He sat on an uncomfortable piano stool, silent, refusing to eat or sleep. Josif's "earthly" needs had faded to such an extent that no one knew what kept him alive. Leksa catered to him lovingly. She fought with all her might to save her brother, a Vlaović. Tried to trick him into eating. Approved of him throwing all the old things out of the house and refusing to play the piano. "You have to gain some weight, and then I'll spruce up your room with new furniture." Josip gave in once or twice, but then he refused everything with a stony silence and stillness as only a corpse would. Once, Leksa tried being a little strict, but the brother pushed her away with tremendous strength and shouted in a voice that hissed with malice. And then he drifted into silence again, not moving, not eating.

Later, Josif's melancholy appeared only periodically. It was interrupted by attacks of anger. During one such attack, he grabbed his sister, who was giving him his medicine and a cup of milk, hit her in the head with the cup, leaving a bloody scar, and then burst out violently. And so, the Vlaovićes headed down the final path of darkness and misery. The attacks of anger seemed to return somewhat regularly, once a month, and each time Leksa, who cared for her brother and tried to calm him down, making sure no one but her saw Josif in this shameful, pathetic state, she would be badly injured. He would strike her and she would keep silent. He would throw a chair at her, she would pick up

the chair and hit herself with it, to satisfy and calm the lunatic. Josif sometimes asked to play the piano. The music brought tears to the eyes of everyone that listened, and Leksa, hidden somewhere, choked with tears, beating her chest with helpless frustration, because her nerves were shattered as well. One day, as he sat at the piano, Josif suffered a stroke. He lost the power of speech and was rendered almost completely blind. Just as the mast of a small sailing vessel sporadically appears in stormy waves, there were moments when Josif's old sanity sparkled. On such occasions, one would think that his undoing was not as severe or complete. He communicated with gestures, and used the piano chords to express his feelings. Even the doctor wasn't too disturbed about his condition. "One realizes how much a man once had, only when he begins losing everything." Josif now sat like a log and, fortunately, became increasingly unconcerned and insensitive to everything. He would only painfully cringe when hearing an irregular, coarse sound. One more link to his deceased father, and the last trace of musicality: a sensitive ear, musical hearing, a divine sign of an artist.

So that was how Leksa Vlaović finally became a man and a Vlaović, the last Vlaović. She unclenched her idle fists, worked and endured for the sake of the family name and the Vlaović pride, things not even an animal would endure. She wouldn't admit her misery and ruin to other people even at the cost of refusing any offers of help with fierce pride. Always angry and bitter, she would mumble to herself, "Help! The shameless and the curious just want to take a look inside the Vlaović home! No need for anything, not today, not ever! When did the Vlaovićes ever need anything from the village?" Her big lie, heroic and martyr-like, was the last attempt at saving the good name of the Vlaovićes.

The little that was left of the land was disappearing. "The hell with everything! At least it'll be a Vlaović who spends what's left of the Vlaović estate." For four years, Josif sat motionless, and was carried to and fro in the arms of his sister. Leksa ran the household "as quiet as a ray of light". And only every so often, spitefully settle the score a little. When Josif, in spite of all his darkness, managed to grab his sister to strike her, she would hit the table where grandfather Marko once dined with her fist, and the loud thud would stop the unfortunate Josif in his tracks, as if he were struck by lightning... Uncle Avram was still living at the time, but Leksa wouldn't even allow him to find out the whole truth about the Vlaovićes, to the last terrible document about the reality of a branched and respectable family. The old man only told stories and fairy tales about the Vlaovićes from memory and from his heart.

Leksa outlived her brother by a full five years, five hungry years. Offer her something and she'd come at you with a knife. She shrank like an old bird. Now she too believed in death, waited for it, and didn't

fear it one bit... What a terribly long and complex process it is for a family to develop a sense of quiet superiority. Marko's fear of illness, then Stefan's courage before death, and Josif's fear of everything, and Leksa's resistance in life, and finally, her monastic and almost saint-like peace before death. After she sold the last piece of the forest preserve – to a Jew, who made sure Leksa didn't see anyone or sign anything – one cold spring morning, Leksa went to an old, sick birch tree in the preserve, with a ladder and rope in hand. But she didn't hang herself. All of the last Vlaovićes were artists at heart. She fell dead from a branch, light, dried up, like black earth.

Still, the people inquired about the burial. But who and how is someone to take care of Leksa's funeral! Besides, there was no money for a metal coffin. Uncle Avram was lying sick in the hospital. He would remember his "rathole", say that the poor man's hospital was also a rathole, and, shining with pride, talk about his Vlaovićes, "Once when I was lying sick in the home of my blood brother Marko, I slept in two rooms, they carried me from one bed to the other so that my sheets would be soft and fresh... And today, you're all rats, rats and dwarfs." Nevertheless, someone transported Leksa's corpse into town, and stepped in to find space in the Vlaović family grave. The parish wouldn't allow it, "We've made the decision to dig it up and subdivide it. There aren't enough plots to fill the ballroom in the big tavern!" Out of respect for the founders, the Vlaovićes, three priests performed the funeral service for Leksa. Those who once guarded the forest preserve she once owned carried her to a simple grave for the poor in the town cemetery. And surprisingly, to this day the parish hasn't dug up the Vlaović family plot! Perhaps the town folk sense in some way that this grave holds and preserves a sense of pride, which also compliments them. So everything remained as it was. If they bring in one of the deceased residents through the west gate, the funeral procession has to pass by the Vlaovićes, who came here from the village, out of sheer spite, bringing with them something the town didn't have. As soon as the procession reaches their grave, the six-sided, black, rusty lantern that never burns protrudes more sharply than usual, and shows them the way. "Further, further, down there, to the edge of the cemetery, there's no room here, can't you see how far the Vlaović plot stretches, and that's just the ones who wanted to spite priest Tima... further, further." The fact that Leksa's bones lay somewhere at the far end of the cemetery didn't bother the Vlaovićes; they never had much respect for the female members of the family.

Translated from Serbian by  
*Persida BOŠKOVIĆ*

VELJKO PETROVIĆ

## THE BUNJA – A STORY OF A MAN WITHOUT ROOTS –

### I

Dr. Stipa Paštrović, a lawyer, “our man” and a permanent, silent candidate for the state parliament, was returning from his regular morning health walk. But today he was late, and it was already eight-thirty when his stocky figure wobbled down the street leading from the railway station. Cooks, widows, wives of clerks who were below the eighth paygrade on the “pay scale”, and girls with dowries fewer than 10,000 Krones were returning from the market, tired, exasperated and insulted by the rude and insolent market women. Everything was so damn expensive, and they were once again sad and disappointed because they couldn’t put together a dinner for a Forint. After telling their uncombed and grumpy wives what they wanted for dinner or stopping at the gate to once again remind them not to forget to feed the cow or the pigs, the men, clerks, lawyers and priests headed off to work, the courthouse or to play chess in the reading room. Along the way, they bowed and greeted each other from across the street, inquired about how they slept and their health, “sampled” live carp and pike, carried home by thickset Hungarian women with a lopsided gait from the weight, and reminded themselves that they need to catch their guarantors before noon, otherwise a protest of draft will eat up the fish kebab. They all, somehow whiter and brighter in the mild and discreetly hazy February morning, stared at the breathless, slightly asthmatic Dr. Stipa while squinting under the rejuvenated glow of the sun, and then nodded and meaningfully winked at each other, turning to look back at him over and over again.

Doctor Stipa pushed on, stamping his feet and thrusting his short, columnar legs – which made his trousers look like they’re about to

burst whenever he sits down – wide and hard like an old swollen, budding shopkeeper’s wife. He was holding a thick stick with rubber on the end in the shape of a fist, which he banged on the ground just as forcefully, but kept far to one side as if he were afraid of hitting himself in the leg. He was doing all this in an erratic, restless and childish manner, and not at his usual steady pace, which could also be said for the way he was shaking his big round head, planted on a body just as big and round, only it was even more conspicuous. A big, white handkerchief was fluttering in his left hand, swinging by his side, perhaps to ease his walking or for balance. He would use it again and again to gather drops of sweat from his flushed, red face.

People greeted him in passing, but he responded only every tenth time, and barely, through his teeth. Without raising his head to look at anyone, he would just tap the edge of his hat with his forefinger, at which time his stick would also rise in a threatening manner.

“My respects, doctor, and a good morning to you!” the parish treasurer shouted joyously in a high-pitched hermaphroditic voice, stretching his face into a smile and widening his eyes, not looking left or right, like a *longa meta*<sup>1</sup> player as he waits for the ball.

“Alásszolgája!”<sup>2</sup> muttered Paštrović as he shook his head and pounded with the stick, breathing heavily, grunting and wiping away the sweat.

The treasurer, Mita Šešević, licked and wiped his lips, like a snooty girl, thinking to himself, “Not good, not good at all! Such a fine gentleman! Not good, not good at all! I knew it wouldn’t last. It’s just a matter of time.”

And as he looked towards the tax collector, Tuna Mučalov, who was running around town trying to cover up some minor defrauding, their eyes lit up with the same question, “When is the doctor finally going to crack!?”

They paused, motionless and grim, looking at each other like two hens, and then they both squinted and let out a clucking sound, wobbling their heads, until Mučalov finally uttered, with obvious pleasure even though he flicked his hand in resignation and despondency, “Ah! Money is the devil, and so is a woman, my fine friend!”

The two men, saddened and weighed down by serious and distressing worries, lowered their heads and parted without saying their farewells, while in their hearts they felt some unadmitted tickle of satisfaction, similar to anticipated pleasure.

Following his feet, Dr. Paštrović turned off his regular route down Zlatna Greda, the quietest street in the town centre, in which shutters

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: An old Hungarian game similar to stickball.

<sup>2</sup> T/N: “Your humble servant”, an archaic greeting in Hungarian.

and windows are closed right after eight at night, leaving a passerby with the impression that no one lives behind those curtains and that moving around in the back, in barns with no windows, are withered old maids, blind doctors and egocentric seniors, who kiss their roses and feed pigeons from the palm of their hands; and that the front rooms smell of old furniture, always covered with white sheets, and pine resin.

The street was so quiet you could hear a toothpick drop and Paštrović was moving as fast as a burglar on the run when he suddenly stopped in his tracks, raised his arms over his head, waved his stick threateningly as he mumbled something incomprehensible, and struck a rock so hard that it must have sent a shockwave of pain through his hand, and then continued on his way, hunched over, spitting by his side, carelessly wiping his face and grumbling loudly, “Ugh! Ugh!”.

He didn’t sleep a wink all night. He wanted to try to rationally and objectively grasp his situation, the reasons for his downfall, the present, and the consequences. But the debts, including bills and house and farm mortgages, the neglected office, angry clients, threatening lawsuits because of the money collected but not settled, the dispersed and unrecorded down payments; thefts by solicitors, which he knows about but has no idea why he is keeping silent; disproportionate overhead costs, a ruthless beautiful woman who had him in her back pocket like a crumpled handkerchief, walked all over him and bled him dry; the future of his spoiled daughter in Leipzig, on whom he foolishly spent huge sums of money despite of being convinced that she possessed no musical ability; and lastly, the numbers, his own sense of helplessness, an unconsciously wasted youth, vain plans, his whole life, lived utterly contrary to his deep convictions, aspirations and desires – all this merged to form a single load, like a huge bag of sand lying on his back. He was suffocating under the pressure, but he couldn’t think clearly or make a decision. He realized there was no longer any point in acting like an ostrich, that it would be stupid to put a bullet through his head with plugged ears and closed eyes and a drunken mind. He wasn’t a weed in the desert, pulled out and carried by the wind at will; he has established bonds that tie him to people, institutions, buildings, the country and the world; to them he must leave a balance sheet of his wasted life. And well, if he ends up with a deficit, if the period at the end of that pitiful, incorrect sentence is a bullet, “No matter!” He must leave behind a balance sheet.

Nevertheless, he was unable to figure out the details. He would get confused, stumble and lose his balance, the string that would have pulled him out of this labyrinth. Why torture oneself any longer? Everything is already crumbling, so why not just let it all come crashing down and bury him!

All he knows is that, in a few days, he will be facing bankruptcy; everything will go under the hammer; he will be taken to court; his daughter will be forced to work as a maid-servant – he knows this, everything else is the cause, already done and finished, hard, cruel and inevitable.

Everything got mixed up in his mind and he shouted out, “Ugh!” bitterly, angrily, disgusted but also pleading. There was hatred, and sorrow, and shame, and indifference, and self-defence and final reckoning, and it was all crashing down – on the townspeople, the family and him.

When he finally came to his gate, he paused and looked at the half circle above the entrance, composed of milky white and coloured glass, making sure he was at home. He wanted to rest in a locked room but was nevertheless disappointed when he arrived. He was uneasy, even afraid of going in. “Ah well!” he grabbed the doorknob, spitting carelessly on his own coat. As he was swearing and wiping it off, he entered with the intention of going around through the backyard and not the hallway, where he would run into his wife, her demands and disapproval.

At the stairs leading to the hallway, he almost fell over Red Pera, the crippled beggar.

Pera held out his shorter, stunted arm, holding a greasy hat covered with holes made by children with squirrel guns, and stood there, leaning to one side because one leg was shorter than the other and he was balancing on his tiptoes, shaggy, unshaven, his bare chest covered with a mop of red hair, with epileptically hanging lips and moronic eyes, mumbling in a deep, drunken bass voice, “Our father in heaven... deliver us from evil... our daily bread” and “our father...”, which he always did, persistently and monotonously, until he is given something.

Dr. Paštrović observed Red Pera with interest. Pera unvaryingly held out his hat and mumbled, “Our father... our daily bread... our debtors...” as if, over the last ten years, this same gentleman hadn’t only joked with him and nothing else, without even glancing into his eyes or taking notice of his crippled arm as he did now.

“What right do you have to shove that filthy hat in my face?” said the lawyer in a serious tone, leaning towards the beggar and staring straight at him with one eye closed as if he were staring down a barrel. “What right, eh?”

“For the souls of the dead, the health of the living... our father in heaven... our daily bread... deliver us from evil... our father...”

“Because you’re epileptic I should give you a five piece and my good shoes? Because you don’t wash and you’re a cripple? And why me? I’m a cripple too. Would you give me alms, brother, if I uncovered

myself and held out my hand? Did you know that I was poor? Like you. Just like you! So get out of here!"

"Hallowed be your name... give us this day our daily bread..."

"There's no bread! No bread! Get out!"

"Again with the comedy, Pišta?! Give him something so he can be on his way. And you, why are you still standing here when the gentleman told you to clear off!" yelled the doctor's wife from a terrace with a glass roof, dressed in a blue morning ensemble, her face powdered like a plum on a stem, hiding her bare neck with fingers crammed with rings, and then threw down a Krone piece, which jingled cheerfully when it fell to the ground.

The Krone piece rolled over to Paštović's feet. His first thought was to step on it and stop him from picking it up, but his wife's presence broke his momentary, volatile, defiant mood, which had filled him with a feeling of desperate pride and pleasure.

"Come in Paštović, I've something to settle with you!" said his wife, as Red Pera turned to leave and, dragging his leg behind him and putting his hat back on with shaky fingers, moved with a sidelong gait out into the street.

"I'll be back later. Let me be."

"I'll be busy later. Come now."

"Why argue?" thought Paštović. "Once I make my ruckus, everything will calm down."

"Augh, where did you get so dirty? Pišta, you're worse than a child. Don't you come in here like that! Shake the dust from your shoes! Mariška, get a brush and clean off Mr. Paštović!"

And while Mr. Paštović was holding his head up so that the brush wouldn't scrape his nose, turning to and fro as if he were trying on a suit, as Mariška stroked him with the brush and removed traces of down with her fingers, he picked up the smell of his French hair grease in her hair! But he didn't say a word, even though this act of audacity and overt theft offended him.

"Everyone is stealing from me, they're all killing me. Thieves, thieves, spiders," he thought to himself, but said, "Thank you!" And once his wife gave her permission, "That's better!" he entered the room, careful not to step on the parquet, straining to put on a friendly face, for madam Boriška was very irascible and sanguine.

## II

Mrs. Boriška Paštović, born Kolossváry de Kolosvár, was already thirty-nine, but thanks to the finest art of maintaining feminine beauty, a carefree life, fine food and cleansing, the years had not left a detectable

trace. Her room was separated from the sleeping chamber by heavy drapes and in every corner, and on all the walls, the washstand, the round mahogany vanity table, cluttered with boxes and bottles, jars with face powder, creams, perfumes, hair and teeth tonics, and hand and nail gadgets made of ivory, there were numerous coquettish mirrors, shining, smiling, enticing. She spent most of her life admiring herself, twisting and turning, and smiling in front of all these bright plates, which flatteringly reflected her black eyes and white, perfect teeth between full, provocative lips, amiably overlooking the spidery wrinkles of time near her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

She was a tall woman and she knew how to carry her proud, upright stature regardless of whether she was walking or sitting. She was a type of woman who wanted to be liked by everyone, which is why she was. With the exception of other women and her husband. The former, because she wanted to outshine them, “Let them burst with envy”, and the latter, because all she wanted was for him to cater to her needs. She didn’t hate Paštrović, although she did feel some disdain for him because of his peasant background and unsightly exterior and, without hiding this, she thought that it was only natural that his duty would be: to serve her! This conviction marked the boundaries and scope of their relationship from day one, without reflection or criticism. He protested against this subjugation, in his heart, but with time, he learned to “cope” with the slavery, and – pegged away.

Her women friends considered her to be a ruthless and despicable woman, but she wasn’t aware of it. In her eyes, it was quite normal for her daughter to wear much cheaper clothes and for the young people to have more fun with her than her daughter. This was also the sort of life “fine lady” Boriška had with her mother, a famous beauty and wife of a ruined landowner, later deputy-prefect. She had spent her entire girlhood observing her mother’s triumphs, listening to whispers about her love affairs, yearning for a marriage which would open doors for her – and fill her life with roses, silk, compliments and the unconditional adoration of obliging black tailcoats.

At sixteen, she returned from a monastery, delivered from the care of nuns to the care of maidservants and matured girlfriends. She was given a separate room from which she could hear muffled, and thus even more enticing, music, dance, murmurs, and whispers coming from the hallway during parties which she was forced to leave by ten o’clock after one sharp look from her mother. She would also often listen in on arguments between her father and mother, either because of some admirer or because of money, and this only turned her already less than ideal attitude towards marriage in another direction. Surrounded by constant noise, strained nerves, and apprehension about

keeping up the grandeur, a proud exterior and cheerfulness as preconditions of a reputable status, she inevitably grew to despise her plain clothing, silence, and solitude. In front of her mother she had to be timid and quiet, with brushed-out curls, but as soon as she was alone, she would yearn for company and call for her maidservants with whom she would dance and jump around, and ask them to tell her about their smooching with soldiers and students. Her girlfriends secretly brought her books with graphic and crude images of the act of lovemaking. She devoured them, and decided to engage in forbidden liaisons.

At the age of seventeen, she kissed her father's clerk, a pitiful, freckled young man with red eyes and ears like a rabbit, whom she even despised. Still, she wouldn't stop teasing him, licking her lips, falling down on the sofa in the office and crossing her legs incessantly, until one day, as she leaned over his shoulder, pretending to look at what he was writing, he kissed her hair and she offered her lips.

She was the reason the clerk finally had to leave. Danger excited her, so she would wrap her arms around his neck even when her father was in the next room. Eventually, the father caught them. He fired the wretch and scolded the mother. She giggled as she listened to her parents argue because of her, and her mother laughing in his face out of spite and defending her.

From then on, they kept a closer eye on her, and so as not to leave her alone in the house, her mother, with a heavy heart, began taking the girl with her to social events. But not even these events gave her real, lasting pleasure. During such social gatherings, her mood and disposition would change in an instant, completely without reason. Throughout the first half of the evening, she would be placid and sentimental and then, out of the blue, she would become cheerful and unrestrained to the point of wantonness. She would engage in a conversation with a young man with all the warmth of confessional whispers and outpourings, the sincerest depth of gaze and all the passion of bodies touching discreetly, and when the young man's pupils widen and his voice grows faint with excitement, she would instantly, as if stung by some innocent word, freeze up or burst out laughing, leaving her knight stranded; or in a completely changed voice, strained from boredom or sleepiness, bring up the weather; or lastly, after interrupting the initiated comments, point her finger, with boyish mischief, at some minor flaw on a gown worn by a lady at the event.

And despite the fact that, aside from family connections and nobility, she had no dowry, not a penny, this type of behaviour made her a very interesting and sought-after girl in the beginning, but with time the young men began to fear and avoid her.

Years passed and she had never been preoccupied by serious matters. She considered marriage her safe haven, which she will enter into whenever she pleases. Perhaps these were her mother's thoughts as well. But, in the thinnest creases of her heart she hid her yearning for love, however the kind of man she desired, some kind of automobile demon with hard muscles, a brutal but gentle politician, brawler, banker or horseback rider, she couldn't find among the thin-necked court trainees and assigned clerks with high collars, a borrowed wit, and sharply pressed trousers.

At twenty-two, she realized she was waiting in vain for her Hus-sar captain with a scar on his face, hard packed with adventure stories from Tibet and Bengal tiger hunting. She wasn't retreating into solitude as much as before, into the coolness of a dark salon where, crouched in a corner, she preferred to daydream about her favorite, neoromantic fantasies while nibbling on threaded lace, or lustfully sucking on lemons and bitter orange peels. She had become tired and listless, and gave up on her precious, secret pleasures.

When she turned twenty-three, she noticed that she was fading, that her hair was turning darker and that her vitality was losing its firmness and smoothness. She became sarcastic, quiet, despondent and short-tempered. She threatened her parents that she would elope with a Gypsy violinist or run away and become an actress. She stopped entertaining suitors, other than – unfortunately – an infantry lieutenant named Schmidt, a good-natured Viennese, who welcomed a good meal, cigars and wine at the home of the deputy-prefect.

She knew the officer couldn't marry her, but she was driven by spite, the urge to toy with the impossible. Her game developed into love. One day, Miss Boriška turned pale. Her heart began to beat faster at five in the afternoon, which was when she expected Schmidt. This feeling was unknown to her. She burst into tears of joy and pain. For, this love wasn't free-flowing or turbulent like the streams in spring; it was the final effort and smile of a gradually beaten down, poisoned soul.

She knew that this late flower of despondent youth hid a deadly worm in its petals. And like a mother who sucks the poison from the lips of her dying child, she wrapped herself around this feeling.

After a few months, Schmidt requested a transfer, back to his one and only Kaiserstadt, where his family cheerfully concluded that their son had put on ten kilograms.

And after an inevitable family storm, Miss Boriška was shipped off to her relatives in Tatra, to forget and recover.

While Boriška was away, the family decided to marry her off no matter what, and they immediately cast their eye on the uncle's legal

clerk, a hardworking, tolerant Bunjevac,<sup>3</sup> Stipa Paštrović, who possessed excellent qualities: he was prone to gaining weight and he would turn red every time the deputy-prefect shook hands with him.

The uncle knew his legal clerk well. One day, when Stipa completed his work and was getting ready to leave for dinner, Dr. Kolosváry de Kolosvár stood before him, with both hands on his trouser suspenders and a wide smile, looking him straight in the eye.

“Listen, young fellow, you’ll be opening your own office soon. Therefore, you’ll need contacts in the administration, both communal and state; you need to run in these circles. The Bunjevac farms won’t be able to feed you. You have to get married. I have a girl for you. There won’t be much money. But, the family and the connections will provide you with a clientele overnight. Here, take our Boriška. They would gladly give her to you. They know you to be a hardworking, solid man, who will – after entering into such a family – play a significant role in our town, perhaps even all of South Hungary. Your origin doesn’t matter. People don’t care about a young man’s origin, but rather his personal traits. So, what do you say?”

Stipa blushed to the roots of his hair; even his close-cropped head turned red.

“Doctor-sir, this is an honor. I, I’m just surprised... how could I... how could my humble self... And then, Miss...”

As he said this, he was too afraid to look into his employer’s eyes, because at that moment he was thinking about all the rumours going around town, and his heart sank, but also leaped with excitement.

“Have you so little knowledge of women? It’s obvious, my fellow, that you have spent your youth engrossed in your studies. Boriška is a smart girl. She’s just a little high-spirited. And this is precisely why she’s always so reserved with you; because you’re a serious young man, unlike those students and nincompoops, who are good for one night of dancing, laughter and frivolous conversation. She has always looked at you differently, and talks about you with admiration. Besides, we’ll talk about this some more. Why don’t you come over for dinner tonight? Agreed?”

“Yes, if you please, doctor-sir!”

“Excellent!”

Stipa Paštrović was not a stupid man. He did very well in high school and law school because, as a farmer’s son, who had no one to lean on, he had to be conscientious and study hard. This, of course, made him an exception, an odd character in this land of preferential

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<sup>3</sup> T/N: A member of the South Slavic ethnic group living mostly in the Bačka region of Serbia and southern Hungary. There are many different theories about the origin of the Bunjevac people, but they migrated to Bačka in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Catholics.

treatment. As an unsophisticated Bunjevac, with farm boy full, rosy cheeks and old-fashion ideas about making an honest living, he stood out in this town of oligarchy, which was, with the help of unscrupulous immigrant officials, run by two Magyarized families, the Feričes from Bajmok and the Weitbachs from Čonoplje, who took turns making their fortunes by loan-sharking, county acquisitions and numerous small-town abuses of power, and who changed wives and mistresses like thoroughbreds, smashed mirrors in Budapest taverns, threw champagne corks at rabbis, and shot bullets through Gypsy instruments.

While his friends simply drifted through the exams with the help of compendia and their uncles' calling cards with noble crowns, he had to sit trembling at the green table, despite going to classes all year, and be fulsomely courteous when a professor looks at him and says that he remembers his face. While his friends were paving their way by rubbing shoulders with pale-faced mollycoddles of the throne and forming acquaintances and fraternities and acquiring bill of exchange signatures of eminent or future eminent gentlemen, he remained unknown, a stranger, uninitiated in the labyrinth of social acknowledgement and advancement.

It was not until he returned to his hometown with a diploma that he was acknowledged and noticed.

But, he still remained an outsider. During his first encounters with his former friends, now *szolgabíró*,<sup>4</sup> county clerks and secretaries, he realized that he had much more to learn, regardless of his schooling. They would look at the Bunjevac up and down from head to toe with astonishment, and he realized they were trying to remember his name, that they were searching his features for memories, looking at him with bewilderment, shaking his hand with strained cordiality, and calling him by his first name with reservation and condescendingly, unsure and in doubt as to whether they were ever that close.

And it never went further than a *Szervusz*.<sup>5</sup> He was too old to start learning their gestures, their refined way of speaking, the lisping and stretching out of vowels. He didn't understand their innuendoes or their puns and chitchat about the "elite" in town and the capital, whom they spoke about as if they were closest of friends.

He knew they didn't consider him their equal, which is why he kept to himself and did the work of three people. His employers appreciated him, but deep in his heart he always felt ill at ease.

Perhaps not so much for his own pleasure, but more out of ambition, he dreamt of a great position, which would put him on the same level as the best in town.

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<sup>4</sup> T/N: "Slave judges" in Hungarian.

<sup>5</sup> T/N: "Hello" in Hungarian.

This was why the invitation from his employer made him so nervous. Even though his healthy, down-to-earth common sense, disciplined by positive knowledge and diligence, objected because he had heard all the rumours about Boriška and knew about the deputy-prefect's financial transgressions; even though he already had a plan in mind, which was to marry a wealthy Bunjevac peasant girl and use the financial capital to seize recognition and power; and even though his still warm, conservative, Bunjevac heart bled at the thought of completely abandoning the quiet warmth of his little farm in Bukovac, under the shade of acacia trees, whitewashed, exposed to the sun, free wind and a beautiful view – the flattering words, the offers and the respect shown him penetrated his soul like a potent fragrance, clouded his pure vision and charged his imagination.

Stipa hadn't clearly decided, but he didn't say no to Dr. Kolossváry.

Boriška received a telegraph message to return home. She had lost weight, but was wrapped in an aura of a new kind of tranquility and melancholy passivity, which made her even more beautiful and alluring.

When she heard what was happening, she went pale, turned around and went to her room without a word. She spent the entire afternoon crying, and in the evening, she announced that she was in agreement.

She was asked for her hand in marriage the next day, and that same evening she was engaged.

Stipa did everything his employer told him to do. He became one of the family and felt like he was dreaming or drunk. They didn't leave him alone for a minute, except when he slept, more restlessly than ever.

He informed his family of his engagement as a done deed. The elderly farmer didn't object. He just shook his head, thoughtfully blowing smoke from his clay pipe.

"Child, you've studied many schools, you're the smartest of us all; I guess you know what you're doing. Just hold the reins, and don't forget about us."

His mother and sister began to cry, but quickly smiled, with tears in their eyes.

"Our Stipa has taken the deputy-prefect's daughter. Now he'll be a prefect."

Boriška was quiet with him. He interpreted her behaviour based on what the uncle had told him and didn't mind. Slowly, he engaged in conversation with her and, at first, these conversations were awkwardly strained, but always sensible. She would answer quietly and stare into space most of the time. But, when he looked at her from the side in that loyal, timid, honest manner, she felt like he was storing the memory of

her features, her white skin, the smell of her deep in his heart. And she enjoyed it.

A week had gone by, and during one such conversation, she turned and looked into his eyes, silently and for a long time. He turned pale, with a sparkle in his eye, and she blushed, as her eyes watered. Stipa hugged her gently and kissed her on the neck, and then her eyes and lips. She closed her eyes and returned the kiss.

That evening, he lay in bed humming, thinking about how today he had kissed a lady for the first time.

### III

When Dr. Paštrović entered the room, he threw his hat on the unmade bed and sat in a rocking chair, in which Mrs. Boriška liked to read feuilletons and Grimm editions of French gossips.

The doctor was just outside in the fresh air, and he wrinkled his nose at the stuffy room flooded with cologne water and the pungent smell of mouth rinse.

He was afraid to ask, “What is it?”, so he waited.

His wife was sitting in front of a mirror, stretching her face, eyes, mouth and cheeks, wiping off white powder from her brows, eyelashes and lips with moistened fingers and her tongue. And while she made these funny faces, like an unruly, spoiled child left alone in a drawing room, without even turning to look at her husband, she began talking quickly, erratically and indifferently, as if she were announcing the skies were clear,

“Please, Pišta, could you give a hundred Krones – my goodness, can you believe this mirror is already distorted – what in the world is wrong with it! – we need to buy biscuits and sandwiches for the party tonight – we’re also out of cognac and rum. The little that’s left in the bottles has gone flat. Oh yes, and my hairdresser pestered me today. Can you imagine, even the milkmaid won’t give us milk anymore. As if we’re going to run away. And I’m not quite satisfied with the way this one did my hair today. I’ll have to ask her to come back this afternoon.”

Paštrović was slowly getting hot under the collar. He felt a mixture of shame and anger.

She was fixing her hair, pushing the strands over her eyes because a tight hairdo didn’t suit her round face.

“Hand me the matches, I want to heat the *Brenneisen*. If you’re busy, I won’t keep you! Where in the world is the alcohol? Mariška-a! Bring me some spirits!”

Paštrović watched her, slowly giving in. His anger turned into sadness.

He felt sorry for this woman; she only faintly discerns the misfortune that awaits her. He still liked her figure, her white, round elbow and lavish strong neck. She moved like a cat. Even though she was heavy, with a full figure and healthy flesh, her every movement was rounded, somehow neatly beautiful, as if she knew how to please a pair of eyes that are always caressing her, just waiting for a lovesick, trembling hand to move over her body, warmly and titillatingly.

He loved this woman, perhaps because he never knew whether or not she loved him and because after eighteen years, after giving him a daughter, they remained as distant as they were the day he first kissed her. During their entire married life, he behaved as though he was still trying to win her heart. He tried to satisfy her every whim, chose a more proper manner of speaking and entertained her without ever daring to let his guard down completely. Perhaps because he sensed something in her demeanor that inhibited him.

On those rare occasions when he tried to reproach her for something, she would turn sad or angry and he would immediately stop and quietly walk away. And this incident was never mentioned again.

He was looking at her now, pained by her assertiveness and coldness. How could it be that they were still so distant? Doesn't she notice, care about his sleepless nights? Does she hate him or is it that she just doesn't understand him? Who is at fault?

There can be no denying that his marriage and married life were a failure, without content and leading to disaster. Did the seed of catastrophe lie in her or him?

Paštrović didn't have the courage to see her as the cause of his doom.

Which is why he didn't know what to say.

"But, I don't have a hundred Krones?" he uttered in a low voice.

"What do you mean? Find it. There has to be, are we to be humiliated?" answered his wife, touching the red-hot iron with wet fingers, "Is it sizzling?"

"I simply don't have it. Can't you see they're filing lawsuits against us almost every day? Can't you see I'm at my wits end, that I'm going crazy with worry?" Paštrović almost broke down in tears.

"Is it my fault? Please, stop making scenes and shifting blame. You knew very well when we got married what our status was going to be and what sort of household we would be managing. Why didn't we distance ourselves from it all, and then we'd know what to do, both of us? You came into our family and demanded that we maintain our status. And you were happy about it. The whole world opened up to you. It's not my fault you didn't know how to manage things. My father told you again and again: end your ties with the Gyulafalvas. Up there,

the conservatives have fallen into disfavour. Come hell or high water, the radicals will come into power. You should have joined the Weitbachs. Now you'd be the head prefect or at least the secretary of state. Instead, that *Streber*<sup>6</sup> Petika beat you to it. Now he'll even take over your public notary job. Go up there! Don't just sit there!"

"There's nothing I can do now. It's done. Balogi's wife has already been to see the minister. It's all over. There's no way out."

"Keep trying."

"It's over. In a few days I'll be ruined!" said Paštrović in a quiet voice, as he wrote the letters r-u-i-n-e-d across the rug with the stick he was holding in his sweaty hand.

"Ru-in-ed?" whispered his wife, afraid the servants might hear, and then turned around to look at her husband's slouched, stiff, miserable frame, resembling a bloated carcass.

"Yes, we're ruined. You, me, and our Eržika."

"And this is how you tell me! Now you tell me? Do you know what this means, do you?"

Her lips turned blue and she clutched to the marble top of the vanity to keep from falling. She was pale and confused. She didn't see the point of this conversation, she was simply choking with anger and disdain for this man, who was hunched over, sitting there like a rotting log.

She trembled, and wanted to pounce upon him, dig her fingers into his hair and gouge his face with her nails.

The clattering of hoofs sounded on the cobbles as a carriage passed by the house on its way back from the railway station with traveling salesmen, who were casually reclining behind a barricade of trunks, thinking of their profits, along with carefree visitors with fluttering veils around their hats, looking left and right with curiosity, and somber relatives in black, who were returning from a funeral.

Mariška could be heard shouting from the kitchen in an unsteady, stiff soprano voice.

Paštrović felt a great weight pressing down on his chest. Finally, he decided to back down and raised his head.

When he looked at his wife, she burst into loud laughter and trembled with tears.

"Please, don't do this! Let me explain..."

"Get out, go, get out of my sight!" she shouted like a madwoman.

"But please, I know it's hard, but I'll try to fix everything, as much as possible..." and he moved to hug her around the shoulders.

She winced.

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<sup>6</sup> T/N: German for careerist, overachiever or nerd.

“Coward, liar, ugh! Shame on you, this is your way of getting out of giving me a hundred measly Krones. I don’t need it, there, I don’t want it now. I’ll find the money myself!”

“What is with you again? I’ll get you the hundred Krones, this time, alright?” he said thinking: tomorrow he’ll gather the bills and show them to her. Then she can go ahead and cry.

“Not this time! Always! You want us to quit now? Oh, oh, my dear, you’re mistaken!” She thrust out her lower lip and smiled at him mockingly as she stared at his shirt, hanging out beneath his wrinkled vest. “Bunja! You’ll never be a gentleman! I know you’d feel much more at home on Sonta soil, sleeping under an eiderdown quilt like a true Vojvodina farmer, but I wasn’t born to make you cheese and wash your papa’s feet. I gave you status and you have to adapt to my world. If you’re worried about me, well I could have cheated on you by now,” and she gave him an insolent look. “And the money? It’s your duty to provide, not mine, Bunja! You want me to eat baked pumpkins like your kind... Go ahead and kill yourself if you can’t support one woman!”

Paštrović took his hat and, breathing heavily, started cleaning it with his sleeve. When he reached the door, he turned around and said in a muffled voice,

“You’ll get the money. I’ll take care of the rest. You’ll see.”

#### IV

Around seven that evening, the regular Sunday group had already gathered in a small drawing room in the back of the house. It resembled an intimate bedchamber because of the shadowy, dim light that softly spread from milky, round bulbs in lily cups, held by a copper bacchante which stood on a fragile coffee table, studded with gallant-style enamel miniatures. The ladies gathered around this coffee table, as if around a magic cauldron, with drawn, trained and inherited smiles, which like veils hid their true feelings, and twirled a scandalous book in which, each week, they recorded all the intimate piquant details.

In this cozy room, with virgin red, silky furniture, ideal for hushed whispers and refined smiles, subtle insinuations and female intrigue, there was no trace of the stench of carcasses or blood over the scattered mist of scented lace, even though each Wednesday so many beloved neighbours, the poor victims, are ripped apart, so much so that, like St. John, even their tongues are punctured with tiny needles.

The first to begin was “her ladyship” who, with depraved purity or pure depravity, and an affected use of grandiose expressions, spoke about the daughter of Envoy Weitbach: how three days ago she came out on the balcony stark naked, singing vulgar songs and sending kisses

to some apprentice shoemakers in the street. "They've taken her to a sanatorium, but there's no change," said her ladyship, "an apple doesn't fall far from the tree; her mother gave birth to her after three months; 'she's desperate to marry'". And then her ladyship took a long puff of her slim Egypt cigarette and blew the smoke up in the air as she rested her head and puffed up her cheeks as innocently as a child blowing soap bubbles. They all laughed and asked to hear all the details, except for the lay assessor's wife, called "mouthy Milčika". They all hated this short, pale-skinned, plumpish woman with squinty, ash-coloured eyes, a raised, wide nose, big masculine mouth and a brusque alto, but also shied away from her sharp tongue. Had she been born in a different place, she would probably be writing a society column; but here her fire was covered with a wet blanket, and she clawed at her friends' eyes with only a spark of her spirit.

None of them could match wits with her because she didn't lie, and she was honest, and everyone knew she was all talk and no action. She was so bold that she wasn't ashamed of loving her husband, of admitting to it and staying faithful to him. She was always very unreserved around young people and mocked all virtues, but in her heart, she abhorred sin. Society didn't understand her, and her friends spied on her, but to no avail. Mrs. Trišler even begged her own lover, Captain Orosi, to seduce mouthy Milčika. All in vain. Finally, they concluded that she must be ill. Otherwise, it would have been unfathomable.

Crossing her legs and looking around the room, Milčika suddenly said, in a mocking voice, "Interesting. When are we women finally going to stop talking and thinking only about men?"

"But they do the same thing, only 'much more'", the pharmacist's wife, Mrs. Šomodi, formerly Šefer, remarked somewhat caustically. She was a freckled woman, who wore so much face powder that it had to be scraped off, dyed her hair black and drew her eyebrows with a burnt match. She had a shrill high-pitched, uncontrollable voice which, in a short sentence, jumped across an octave at will. Her husband was a twin, who was always busy at the pharmacy, and her brother-in-law was a district prefect and a bachelor. As the former, he had horses and civil servants and plenty of free time, and as the latter he had a free heart and nice apartment. This is why no one in town blamed Mrs. Šomodi's frequent *error in persona*.

"Fiddlesticks! You know better than anyone how little time your husband has for such things. How busy the poor man is at work, providing security and a comfortable life for you and his loved ones."

And her face twisted like a full moon in comic strips.

The argument was ended by her ladyship, gazing at the owl on the clock with electric bulging eyes, "Shush... Shoo hens!... the main thing

is that it feels good. And as long as it feels good, keep doing it. Live while you can. In the end, we'll all be pushing up daisies."

After this cracker-barrel philosophy, discussions started about why men like actresses and whether or not jealousy can be cured and how, and so on. (Her ladyship was of the opinion that husbands should be cheated on; a finished sinner is more easily drawn out than one who is under the burden of appearances. At least then a woman knows how to react to a done deed).

The children were in the big room, illuminated both by bluish electric lights and yellow candlelight. Paštrović's daughter was sitting at the piano. She was a petite, sluggish, not so pretty girl who took after her father. Her every move was strained and stiff, not at all refined. She would drag her feet and swing her arms as she walked, and wouldn't wear high heels for anything. She would talk through her nose and then, with her chin propped on her fist, stare straight into the eyes of the person she was speaking to, or just turn sideways and shrug her slack shoulders.

She never wore a corset or a body shaper, only crepe blouses in which her still developing breasts stood out even less.

She was bothered by her looks, so she intentionally emphasized how little she cared about her appearance. This too is a kind of vanity, solace and a defence mechanism. Some people, who are not at all naïve, will rather themselves mention rumors going around behind their back than endure even a veiled insinuation come out of someone else's mouth. She delighted in music, but didn't understand it. Sitting alone at the piano, she would often be overcome with longing, a desire to express her feelings through music. But as soon as she played two or three chords, she would throw herself on the keyboard and cry. At such times, she regretted being rich – because she was convinced her family was very wealthy – and wished she were poor, and that a lover would come and snatch her away.

She was sitting alone, bent over the piano; her left hand hanging by her side, and her right hand resting on the silent keyboard. Next to her, sitting very close, was Kezmarski, the legal clerk without a salary, talking, chattering and laughing. She was listening to his voice because it was soft and pleasing, but she didn't hear the words because he was only paraphrasing, for the umpteenth time, his "Epicurean" principles. The door to the dining room was ajar, and through the gap she could see Engineer Halas kissing her mother's hand, starting with the fingers and making his way to the shoulder, while she was laughing and slapping him affectionately on the cheek.

"How boring! I don't understand how mother is still not tired of it all!" Nothing excited her anymore, not the game with words and fire,

not the friction and twisting, not even the chocolate candy. Sometimes she would take a drink of rum when no one's looking, and she liked the burning sensation in her throat as her eyes watered from the sharp flavor of alcohol. One day she'll run away with someone, and they'll get the shock of their life.

Kezmarski was now explaining how women's legs should be slim at the bottom, like that of a dove, and then further up like a bottle of Champaign, and he has already calculated how many more sentences he will say before approaching Flora, a poor girl with a limp and three thousand Krones guaranteed.

After squandering ten thousand Forints on women, plain Hungarian poker and "classy" drinks, and a visit from his creditor, Kezmarski decided to "swoop down" on the poor rich girl with all his charm and eloquence. He used one promissory note after another to pay for flowers, sugar and serenades, convinced that he was going to "pull off" this hazardous game, and then "take care of the bank". Both the girl's guardians and her common sense told her the real reason for this dashing young man's enthusiasm. She knew he spent his time practicing fencing, guessing any card just by touching it, pronouncing the letter "r" with sophistication, nibbling at his black, trimmed moustache and caring for his complexion of a blushing girl (and they say he uses raw beef), but it didn't matter; her youth refused to listen and wanted desperately to believe in the possibility of love because of her alone.

As soon as Engineer Halas arrived, everyone greeted him, shouting and calling out his nickname, "Szervusz, Pića!".

He smiled, bowed and kissed the fingers of all the girls and women, and had a prepared witty remark for each of them. He had a round, clean-shaven face, mischievous lively eyes and dark, shiny, sleek hair, perfectly parted in the middle, which shone like the ebony.

No one knew where he came from, or his native country. They assumed he was of Slovak origin and that he had Magyarized his name. Women also called him "Slovak", in jest. He charmed his way into the social circles the moment he came to town. He was able to wrap himself in a shield of wittiness because of his knack for compelling storytelling, and knowledge about every little thing and a whole variety of social customs and relations. He was the best dancer, skater, and no one knew how to hit a ball on a wire with paper as fast as he did; he had a whole collection of revolvers, two dogs of Countess Esterházy's noble breed, whose blue blood was made famous in the documented history of dog breeds, and he knew how to play numerous waltzes and satirical songs, and even opera excerpts on the piano.

He would always drink liqueur after dinner and eat peaches with a knife and fork; no one knew how to lean back in a leather English

armchair and discreetly reveal his silk socks as well as he did. Men reproached him, called him “man of the world”, who will one day rub someone the wrong way and disappear like an automobile, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and a foul odour; but they all imitated him.

Last winter he went sleigh riding with Mrs. Trišler, now he is dancing with Mrs. Paštrović, but come spring, he plans to play lawn-tennis with the wealthy “Rascian” woman, Mrs. Prekajski, because she said she hated her husband and the austerity of the “affectedly dainty Orthodox women”.

The girls called him over to play something, and the women asked to hear his newest anecdotes, riddles, and recent intrigues.

The women grabbed him by the hand and shoulders, while he pretended to resist but then finally sat in the middle of the drawing room, with his legs crossed like a Turk, and began talking in a sweet voice. And while they were all laughing, gasping and shrieking, in the next room, the guest sat rocking in a chair, torturing and caressing the enduring piano by turns, and singing, with half-closed eyes, folk songs that were a mixture of Slovak sighs, the silent sorrow of love songs, Gypsy pain and Turanian wantonness.

Around eight in the evening, just as the last sandwiches with butter, *ajvar*,<sup>7</sup> and ham, a welcome, thrifty replacement for dinner, were disappearing in the mouths of the gentlemen, Dr. Paštrović carefully and unnoticeably opened the door to the drawing room. They noticed him when he was already in the middle of the room. He was wearing a vest, looking somber and noticeably drunk. He didn't even notice the gale of laughter and walked straight towards his wife. Her face turned red, but she tried to suppress her anger.

“Dear Paštrović, why in the world would you come here in such a state, and with ladies present! My goodness, you never seize to amaze me with your humour and whims!”

But Paštrović took her hand, and while she was pushing him out of the room, he wouldn't stop talking to her.

“Shhh! Not now! If you'd like to join us, and you should, go get dressed and come back in better humour!”

And she ran off humming to get his coat and helped him put it on. His eyes filled with tears.

“There's nothing left, my dear, nothing!”

Hearing this, she embraced him and pinched him fiercely on the shoulder, but before he had a chance to react to the pain, she took his arm and burst into sincere laughter, playacting for the guests, and as she pushed the door wide open, still laughing, she bowed gracefully to the guests, who stood speechless and then started clapping.

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<sup>7</sup> T/N: A type of relish made principally from red bell peppers and oil.

Paštrović made his way to the round table and sat between Mrs. Trišler and Mrs. Šomodi, instantly reaching for the cognac because he had a terrible headache. He felt a stabbing pain in his temples, as if they were open wounds and someone was repeatedly pocking them with bony fingers.

As he trembled, blowing out the flames of the strong-flavoured Martell, he recalled the unpaid bill at the grocery store and how this was probably only his fifth time drinking this cognac. No one offered him anything. Kezmarski picked up an anchovy sandwich, dug his big, sparse, white teeth into it and, giving him a smile, said, “I beg your pardon!”

Halas was squatting next to the chair his wife occupied a moment ago. He stood up slowly, straightening his pant legs and, all red in the face, stared fixedly into his eyes – as if trying to demonstrate his bravery,

“How is your health, Doctor?”

“Tchah, how!” replied Stipa, pouring himself another glass of cognac.

This question offended him. And he couldn’t look at Halas because he would have immediately noticed that at that moment, he had come to hate him. Paštrović knew that this young man wasn’t inquiring about his health, that his question encompassed humiliation, pity and hidden knowledge of his destitution. As he was gulping down his drink, he glanced over the people in the room. They were all trying to hide that they were watching him. Their faces were struggling to put on a mask of indifference or benevolence.

And even though Mrs. Trišler, with her back turned, was addressing Flora in the next room, it was obvious that she had turned around without yet knowing who she was going to address,

“Flora, have you finished the roses on the *schmuckhalter*?<sup>8</sup> She paints beautifully,” she added softly, as if this was something new.

“She’s obviously trying to break the unpleasant silence,” thought the lawyer. “I interrupted their banter and ruined the mood. I’m bothering them. I’m like a fly in the ointment.”

“Doctor, will you be attending the assembly of the South Hungarian Cultural Society?” Kezmarski inquired abruptly and licked his lips.

“Why?” Paštrović snapped as if woken from a dream.

“Well, um,” he started, brushing his hand across his polished, sweet-smelling head, “as a supporter of our state’s idea for these uncultured regions, you can contribute a lot to correcting and supplementing the methods of our cultural mission. In all honesty, our homeland and our state-building idea...”

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<sup>8</sup> T/N: Jewelry holder in German.

“What mission, what culture, what homeland, what idea, fuff, oh please, young sir! Words, words...” Paštrović leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands over his round, cuddly belly and tilting his head mockingly and defiantly, like a man who is in the mood to argue and recklessly knock heads with painful truths. “Please, tell me honestly, do you love your homeland and its people? Eh?”

Kezmarski pulled on his moustache, his eyes blinking, and blushed down to his shirt collar.

“I think that every true and honest Hungarian loves his homeland and people. This is where they’ll bury us. Of course, the Communist International and the youth inflamed by the propaganda...”

“Augh!... I didn’t ask you to cite arbitrary phrases. All I ask for is a little honesty. In all seriousness! Who is a true Hungarian? With all due respect, but you’re a Slovak, little Moldovanji is Romanian, Halas? Whatever! And I’m a Bunja. And we are to be true Hungarians. We’ve gathered here from far and wide and divided roles. What mission! Flans, my sir, that’s just empty talk; all the Weitbachs, along with the other so-called Swabians, are now crowding just to get their names in the capital’s press, so they could be next in line when another carcass starts to reek. Sports and elegant clothes, that’s the main concern of the barons and baronesses in our homeland, and we imitate them because, if you’re smart, “Hungarianness” is wonderful – a lucrative stock. And the stockholders, well, they’re our missionaries. ‘You love your homeland and people’, you can tell your children this at bedtime! I know: what I love, I also dream about. I love women, and I dream about women; I love cards, *richtig*, and I dream I’m playing *macau*; I love fish paprikash, and of course, I dream about a picnic in Gombos, but I’ve never had a dream about my homeland and people... Tell me, please, what is ‘homeland’, what are ‘people’?”

“Hahaha, the attorney is joking! Hahaha! Excellent! Haha, haha!”

“Joking? I’m not joking, unfortunately!” said Paštrović angrily and quickly continued, as if he were afraid that they were going to interrupt the torrent waiting to burst out of him, “Take our elections, for example. The slogan is always: ‘in opposition to non-Hungarians’! And you know very well that this exclusion serves our so-called ‘idea’ the least. Why, it’s not even taken into consideration. The aim is simply to secure the livelihood of the administrators’ sons, because they have yet to repay their debts to patriotic establishments and marry the administrators’ daughters without a dowry. The Hungarian army! Eight thousand vacant spots for the ruined gentry. Or, is patriotism born of bribes and frauds? You don’t remember because you’re young: after the occupation, a large sum, intended for the support of the wounded and their families, who went down in Maglaj and Doboj, among whom

there were also Croats, and Rascians and Hungarians, just vanished into thin air. Some deputy-prefect ‘cashed in’ on this, but that was it. And where did the huge sums of money, ‘the tulips’, go, who tore down our allies of plane trees, who cleaned out the cement from the concrete under out cracked asphalt, why is it that a German company is ruining our eyesight with its lighting? Eh? You gentlemen celebrate Arpad who brought the Hungarians here. As you should. Besides, he’s easy to paint. Who the hell would paint arpads who evict people? There’s no compassion, my sir, no compassion! It’s all just ruthless taking and more taking! If you have compassion, you’re dead!”...

“But,” and Paštrović jumped up, his face flushed, “why so glum! Tonight we’re going to have a good time. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be right back!”

Paštrović, excited and out of breath, knocked over a cup of tea and said laughing, “Let it be known whose household is plenteous!” as he slammed the door behind him.

The guests sat there in shock. They could feel a storm coming.

“I never knew you had such a *schneidig*<sup>9</sup> husband,” her ladyship needled her.

“I may even fall in love with him, after all this time!” replied Mrs. Paštrović casually, biting her lip and glancing at the door nervously.

Young Eržika shoved a whole piece of coffee candy, filled with sickly sweet cream, into her mouth and, without chewing it, stared into nothing. Her thin blouse was trembling above her heart. Suddenly, she quivered slightly, slowly stood up to go out into the hallway and after opening a window, she leaned out into the darkness and the cold, wet breeze that was brushing roughly against the limbs of a wild grapevine surrounding the window. She heard her father’s whispering voice and, when he came back, she hugged him around the neck.

“What were you doing daddy?”

Her father cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

“Ha, ha, you’ll hear soon. It’s a happy surprise.”

Eržika pushed him away, sulking, convinced there was nothing he could do to surprise her or cheer her up.

## V

The guests were getting ready to leave, but Paštrović invited them to stay for dinner and, with a tone that ridiculed both him and his guests, he randomly announced that this day marks the twenty-five-year anniversary of his promotion. He graciously mingled with his guests, helped

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<sup>9</sup> T/N: Bold, dashing in German.

everyone to the table and thought about how he was going to gallantly feed these vultures one more time. They've devoured his roots, bitten off his flower buds; let them sate their hunger with the remaining dried leaves.

"Petar, put the champagne on ice."

How strange, why did it take him so long to open his eyes? He sees now who is undermining him and who the people he shook hands with for years, without ever carefully looking into their faces, really are. He never before noticed Kezmarski's dreadfully empty, tired eyes, or his disgustingly thin skin. If he were to scrape it with his nail, it would peel off as easily as the flesh of overripe Chequers fruit.

Her ladyship was simply revolting. It's so disgusting to see an elderly woman flirting with feverish eyes, as blood flows into her withered cheeks, desperately trying to look young. Boriška is going to be just like her. Disgusting.

"Make sure you place a fried egg on every steak. I've already ordered the meat."

Who are these people? What ties me to them? When I go broke, they'll cast me aside instantly, just like poor Đurica Birilović. He wined and dined them for five years, but when he was caught falsifying, they all claimed they'd known for a long time that he would end badly.

Have I slept through twenty years of my life? Or was I also spell-bound by the allure of high society, like that crazy Serb? Dear God, did I, let's say ten years ago, when I saw them, heard them and shook their hands, think something about them; was I even thinking? I must've trusted them. But why the hell would I trust them? Did I like them? Not likely! I probably didn't even know all their names.

So sad, they never liked me and I never liked them.

I was crazy. It's so strange that I realize only now that I've been crazy my whole life. It's the craziness of waiting and tolerating... No, no. That's not it. It's the craziness of a life without meaning. A life wasted... That's not it either. When I was born, I was certainly destined for something. Only, I never found that something. I lost my way. I wandered into this group and got confused. They ripped me out and took me with them. I wasn't myself, I was theirs. My wife is right: I'm a Bunja. Only, she doesn't understand. I'm a Bunja, I'm a wheat spike which they pulled out and put in a greenhouse. I'm a Bunja...

Paštrović led his guests to the table with a smile on his face. They all thought it was because of the so-called anniversary and out of courtesy, but it was really because he liked being a Bunja, and it gave him pleasure. But they don't understand that. And he has to tell them. Let them laugh.

By midnight, the whole house echoed with chatter and cheer.

They danced, sang, glasses were breaking, and Kezmarski was wiping blood from his lips because he wanted to impress the group by eating a whole champaign glass.

The women were flushed and dreamy-eyed. They would burst into giggles and then fall into an armchair, tap the cheeks of the Gypsy violinist and twitch the gentlemen's moustache, pleading that they tell them: who taught them to kiss.

Halas grabbed the violin from the Gypsy and started playing the Waltz. Everyone danced in circles, bumping into each other and the doorframes; the only two people sitting were Paštrović and his wife.

Paštrović was looking at the chandelier, lost in thought, while the wistful waves of music washed over him. In every Waltz, there is always one irresistible note of nostalgia...

He was recalling his youth; the two or three parties he went to, with an anxious heart of a young man, and then returned, sad and disappointed because under the dim lights, amidst rustling silk, gleaming eyes and shiny earrings, he was always on the sidelines, looking dejected and drawn. He remembered learning the Waltz, but he never danced because he was afraid of making a mistake and being laughed at by everyone in the room. Every now and then, he would decide to approach a pretty girl, but then his heart would begin to pound with fear and he would hesitate, pale, not knowing what to do with his hands, until someone beat him to it. And he would feel relief and give up trying. At home, he would angrily throw his patent leather shoes in the corner of his cheap, verminous room, and bury his face in a pillow, rebuking and pitying himself, and while the music was ringing in his ears, he would twitch all night because he could clearly hear the girl laugh as she passed by him under someone else's arm; and at daybreak, when he finally did fall asleep, he dreamt about sliding across the polished, bright dancefloor, nibbling a strand of a girl's fluttering hair.

“Come, old man, dance with me.”

But after only a few steps, Mrs. Paštrović left her husband. “You’re such a klutz! Halas, come here!”

And so Paštrović staggered in-between cheerful couples back to his chair, sweaty and annoyed, and watched his wife and the engineer as they danced, very closely.

Mrs. Paštrović parted her lips slightly, as if she wanted to take in the sounds and the young man’s breath.

The lawyer felt insulted. He was hurt. He wasn’t bothered by the rivalry, but rather offended by the injustice; and he was ashamed. Perhaps the whole town was laughing at him, thinking he was a fool who didn’t suspect anything? Perhaps she was cheating on him? How dreadful, simply dreadful. It never crossed his mind; and if it did, it was only

an intrusive thought, like when a person imagines killing someone. But tonight it was real; only now he accepted it as just another stab wound inflicted on a body that had already been drained of blood.

She was never my wife. Dear God, oh God, how dreadful and horrible, horrible and stupid!...

One by one, the other husbands joined him. Mrs. Šomodi, whose frowning, bald husband was looking daggers at her – while at home he had to gulp down his reheated cabbage stew in nothing flat and toil over his son's math problems, searching for stubborn variables that were playing hide-and-seek – shouted over her shoulder, “We're carousing!”

The poor man shrugged his shoulders sourly and turned to the ham and jellied crab for comfort. Sitting next to him was the great captain Trišler. He was clanging his ring against a glass when he suddenly jumped up to punch the servant, but only grazed his chin, “Perica, bring me a bite of something warm, will you?” He was irritated because he lost all his money playing *ampre*, which he was hiding from his wife in the handle of a bat, with a hole drilled through it especially for this purpose, and which he received only that morning from the milkmaids in return for not examining the milk. From time to time, for the sake of his reputation and his angry customers, he would examine the milk, but only in the marketplace, in front of everyone, and then he would kick the milk containers, making a racket that would knock a flea off a dog's back. The milkmaids would start shouting and cursing the gentry, and take their revenge on the following day by brutally “baptizing” the milk, which was already spoiled by bread crumbs. Except for this personal whim, he usually left the marketplace to the lieutenant captain. Let him deal with the “small fish”, he's younger and has no family. He took care of the nightspots, brothels and madams, who boasted that they didn't need licences, since they're on good terms with the gentlemen in the town council.

Her ladyship's husband sent a carriage with a servant, with a refined nose and a savings book, who would always get her out of trouble whenever she got carried away playing *Frische Vier*<sup>10</sup>...

Just as the guests sat down again, someone cried out from outside.

They all shouted, “Szervusz Petika!” Petika Mrazović was the last descendant of the old Serbian patricians, on whose damaged grave-stones in the Orthodox churchyard one could still make out the neglected and moldy inscriptions: “elected citizen and senator of a free town”. One of his great grandfathers even advanced to the position of colonel of a Šajkaš regiment. He also wrote odes in an anapestic meter. Petika stood

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<sup>10</sup> T/N: Gambling card game commonly played in Germany and the countries of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.

before this crowd with a cross-eyed stare, snuffling. So he was obviously in a cheerful mood. Petika used to serve in the tax profession, with a monthly salary of a hundred and forty Krones, and now he was spending the last of the money he received from selling his farm, which was bought by the farmers themselves so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of the Hungarians. Only five years earlier, he was enjoying Baranja Riesling and Roederer champagne, and now he is drinking spritzers with Slivovitz. He was expelled from high school because he called Kossuth a dog, out of spite; and today he can barely read the Cyrillic script and says that he can only swear in Serbian "with gusto". But when he hears the bagpipes, he weeps and says he is a Serb, stomps on his own hat, hugs the bagpipe player and babbles, "My friend, I'm a Serb! You understand me." After he crumples a five-krona banknote, Joca, the bagpipe player, chuckles and understands everything.

"That, that Mariška of yours doesn't even know how to help a man with his coat," Petika hiccupped and reached for a glass. He was a man with tiny little arms and legs, like a girl, and a flushed, harmless, boyish face, wearing a vest no wider than twenty centimeters. You wouldn't notice unless you looked more closely at his wrinkled cheeks, the wrinkled skin on his neck and his grey, dry and brittle hair that he was nearly forty years old. He gave the impression that he had never lived out his bachelorhood. His growth was stunted when he was still a boy and, like unripe fruit in a cellar, he grew old in the humid nights heated by smoke and wine vapours.

His elderly landlady felt such sorrow the many times she had to carry his unconscious body to bed. There was so much sadness in his upturned, bloodshot eyes, the swollen blue veins on his eyelids and his skinny calves.

In subsequent years, they tolerated his company only for amusement. And so, as soon as he went to sit down, Trišler pulled away his chair and Petika "stretched out" on the floor.

Prekajski arrived right after Petika. It was difficult for him to walk around at night because his eyes hurt. In all likelihood, this was the first sign of a thinning spinal disc.

Halas was teaching Mrs. Prekajski how to blow smoke rings when her husband stopped at the door to clean his eyeglasses with deerskin.

"You're hunting me down as well? Don't worry; I won't get my feet wet."

Prekajski once again swallowed her remark. He thought it would be enough for her to see that he was still wearing his winter coat; that it would annoy her and force her to leave with him. He would have left her a long time ago, along with her entire dowry and with God's blessing, but he was afraid of the embarrassment, and tolerated her because

of their two children. He was a civil servant, in the true sense of the word. Conscientious and organized. This is why the district-board supervisor was always giving him more work than the other employees. He was dissatisfied, but he endured and didn't want to toady up to anyone. In school, he learned Russian and read a lot. He followed all the latest developments in society and had a reputation of being a diligent but politically unreliable clerk. "You're a pan-Slav!" said the supervisor once, when he used "Serbian-school" matches to light a cigarette.

"What would you know about pan-Slavs, *magnificus!*" he replied irascibly, and from that time on, he was given the worst jobs. Deep down, he really was a supporter of an independent nation; he taught his children to recite folk songs and Čengić-aga, which Mrs. Prekajski thought was an unrefined habit that will only be detrimental to the children, and that they will get failing grades from the Hungarian teachers.

He secretly espoused socialist principles; moreover: he even sympathized a little with the terrorists, but he also annoyed the savings banks by moving his wife's money from one to the other, even for a mere quarter of a percent. Yesterday, he argued with his wife because she accepted a baby pig, as though it were "an apple", from a farmer who needed a favour from Prekajski. He let the piglet out into the street to oink, to the joy of young apprentices. His wife didn't see this as a question of honor. In her eyes, it was a blessed custom and she thought nothing of it. "You're only spoiling the farmers even more, and they're already walking all over us!"

He didn't have much respect for Serbia because "over there the teachers politicize", but he did tell his son about Vojvodina and Miletić, and he voted for the government, with resentment in his heart.

The newcomers worked diligently to reach the degree of enthusiasm of the "locals", and Prekajski was the only one who wasn't drinking because it was bad for his "eye catarrh", and he had a lot of work to do tomorrow.

Paštrović was silent, but when his wife tried to persuade him to go to bed, he protested forcefully and drew his chair next to Prekajski because he respected him as a well-read man.

"Steva, you're a smart man, tell me honestly, is this all a farce or is it genuine? All this here," and he pointed around the room, knocking down the oil and vinegar. "And, and," he continued as he grabbed Prekajski's gold chain, "and everything that's happened and is happening to us now. You know. You understand..."

"I understand," replied Prekajski, noticing his drunken state and hoping to get rid of him. "Hmm. It all depends how you look at it. It's a comedy, but our hearts are aching."

Prekajski painfully stretched his thin, pale, chapped lips.

Paštrović nodded and said, as if to himself, “Our hearts are aching. But you see, mine just started aching towards the very end. It’s aching!” and his eyes, looking innocent and helpless, filled with tears.

Prekajski turned to look more closely at his friend. This struck a chord with him and he placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

“Ah well, what can we do? We have to keep pushing; for as long as we can. It can’t be fixed.”

“Can’t, you say. Of course. If only I could go back! Don’t think I’m saying this because I’m drunk. That’s not it, my friend; nothing went the way it should have. I should start all over again, if only I could...”

“I should’ve stayed on the land. I should’ve stayed a Bunjevac, like my father and grandfather; grown tall in the fresh open air, like a field poppy in the wind; married a girl I spoke to for the first time while dancing the *kolo*; had many children; plowed the land, sang, and even beat my wife when she needed it. I should’ve slept on hay, snoring, when I was too tired or drunk from the grape must, and died when the time came. And you know, what you sow, God willing, you will reap; and if not, you just pull in your horns and eat more potatoes and less ham over the winter. And you give your son a good beating when he starts staying out until all hours of the night, and the next day, his right behind you tying the sheaves. There’s no greater love and happiness! For a Bunjevac, dying is easy. This is hard. I’m not dying, I’m deteriorating. I’m drying up like a weed after a plough pulls out its roots...”

Prekajski was now listening to him intently; he too was ready to confide and if at that moment the great captain hadn’t stood up to give a toast, he would have poured his heart out.

Trišler spoke over giggles, clinking of glasses and interruptions, praising the host to the skies. He praised him as a father and husband, a citizen and colleague, a patriot who will be rewarded for his public work, who in these limited circumstances wasn’t able to spread his wings, but who will nevertheless soar and become the pride of the society, especially his friends, his noble wife, “that bright spark of his”, and his sweet and talented daughter. “*Éljen, éljen, éljen!*”<sup>11</sup>

During the toast, Paštrović was wiping his forehead with the palm of his hand, sweating and arranging matches into columns and rows. He was embarrassed, and couldn’t wait for his turn to talk.

When he stood up, the noise had not yet died down. He made a swooping motion with his hand to smooth out the waves of chatter, but only the Gypsies were silenced. Mrs. Paštrović shouted out smiling, “Pišta, be brief! Don’t get carried away again. Be careful, your ascot is crooked!”

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<sup>11</sup> T/N: “Long live” in Hungarian.

But he just waved her off, looked down at the saltshaker, closed his eyes and dug his left hand into his pant pocket.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I didn’t get up to thank the great captain for his kind words. Or, at least, that’s not the only reason. I got up to speak, to bare my soul.”

Paštrović paused for a moment and looked around, without stopping to observe anyone in particular. All he saw were his friends’ heads, surrounding him like cabbage heads in a cabbage patch. The shouting and the noise died down because the host was speaking in a low, calm voice, looking completely sober. His voice was blurry and full of reproach, and everyone turned to take a closer at that person whose lips were crying, and to see: was this really Dr. Paštrović.

His forehead wasn’t lined with the usual thoughtful wrinkles of a person giving a toast. His face had a glow, and a calm expression.

Eržika’s chest tightened and she couldn’t take her eyes off her father.

“Dear Tuna, that was a nice speech, but I’m not going to say ‘thank you’. Why continue to deceive ourselves? Today I want to speak the truth. You, my friend, were lying. Yes, yes, you lied.”

Paštrović uttered this so calmly and quietly that no one jumped to intervene. They all thought, even Tuna, that it would be better fitting to take this unusual introduction as a joke; and so, the guests forced a laugh, even though both the captain and Mrs. Paštrović squirmed uncomfortably, as their faces stretched into sour smiles.

“But, the worst thing is that with each uttered sentence, you were thinking to yourself, ‘I’m lying’. Still, the saddest part of all is that we’ve all lied to each other, to ourselves and the entire world, in this exact same way as long as we’ve known each other.

“No, no, my dear guests, you all know quite well: I’m no fighter, or a great man, I haven’t accomplished anything, and our so-called homeland and people won’t be rewarding me. My friend was lying when he spoke about happiness because I’ve never experienced it and now I know I never will.

“You disapprove, you’re agitated, you can’t understand what I’m saying or why. You can all leave, if you like, but I want to say my piece. I’ve kept quiet long enough. These walls, which I’ve truly looked at for the first time today, will listen to me. My ears, which are hearing the voice of Stipe Paštrović for the first time today, will listen to me.”

His wife wanted to pull him back down on the chair, but he looked at her with such loathing that she backed down and walked away to join the other ladies.

Eržika was suffocating with an aching feeling of shame, just like when she dreamt she was running down a street naked and filthy. She approached her father, taking his hand, “Daddy, why are you saying

these things? Sit back down, no one is listening to you!” Her father caressed her hair, “Leave me be, I have to.”

“My whole life has been one long, drunken, foggy journey through unfamiliar landscapes, with unfamiliar people. We would pass by places and I never took measure, neither by eye or in steps; years passed, and I never measured them in deeds; springs and youths blossomed, and I never measured them in love’s ecstasy. I was surrounded by the patter of neighbours’ shoes, and I greeted and embraced them, but their smiles never warmed my heart. Ah, I also had a wife, but love and friendship, never.

“I had a homeland and belonged to people with a history, and I see that I have nothing now.

“Everything around me is cold and gloomy; everything is foreign to me. I wandered in and now I’m desperate to find the way out, but I feel that my blood and rotting corpse will only feed the wild grass and thorns.

“I came to live among you as a stranger, and like a leprous sheep, exiled and an outcast, I shall die. I abandoned what was mine, small and modest, but warm and steadfast, and received nothing in return. I drifted, withered away without my roots. Because I’m a Bunjevac, a true farmer, who brought his warm heart, which blossomed next to an earthen, whitewashed bank, into your world. A world in which the first virtue is the ability to tear one’s heart out as early in life as possible, while it’s still undeveloped and green, or keep it hidden. I had to remain a Bunjevac; or find contentment in solitude, search for happiness within myself, without you, and in spite of you; or with stick in hand, head for the canyons and the sea, where the proud Paštrović tribe has been strengthened by storms and battles with sails, waves, bare rocks and pirates since the beginning of time.

“Like the smell of incense of ancient vesture, wisps of foggy childhood memories rise up in my soul, of long, cozy winter nights and my grandfather who, with noble pride and deep sadness, told me stories about our homeland, where the sea speaks and the wind sings, where life was hard and death was easy and glorious; about Saint Stefan Štiljanović, who was a Paštrović, a despot and a man with a heart and soul. When famine gripped Baranja and Tolna, he opened his granaries and treasures to the hungry; and when he died, his body remained untouched by time. ‘You see, son,’ my grandfather used to say, shaking his long grey hair, ‘this is why we, the Bunjevac people, love the sea and waves of wheat and farm life, because this is where a whirlwind is free to twirl and because the land submits only to God and a resilient hand. The moment a Bunjevac abandons it, he loses his peace and happiness.’

“I threw away the cheerful sounds of farmers hailing each other across vast meadows, quiet singing voices at dusk, with shadoofs

squeaking in the background, the sound of sheep grazing on pastures and a bell chiming around the neck of a black wether; I abandoned the joys of Christmas and sleeping on rustling straw, the smell of yellow soil, a red-hot stove and freshly baked bread, the aroma of costmary and basil, and the embrace of youthful, hardworking hands. I no longer know what it is to have a good night's sleep, to wake up bright and breezy, to read the stars and foretell the weather.

"And what did I get in return? Disquietude, restlessness and a desperate pursuit of eternal drunkenness and feigned passions.

"I carried in my heart a longing to fight for an idea I love, and for the one I love. But I am surrounded by absurdity and abstruseness without love.

"You can't understand this. Because you and I are not one. We just lied that we were one, but we weren't the same for a second. This lie and the pretending are costing me my life..."

Most of the guests had left. The only people who stayed were Prekajski, who outstayed his wife for the first time, and Eržika. Her mother was walking the guests out and apologizing for her husband, explaining that he was as drunk as a skunk and didn't know what he was saying. Eržika retired to her room and wept under the covers out of shame and despair.

Paštrović continued in an even lower voice, "I'm drifting, torn from my roots. I'm withering away and cannot be saved..." and then looked at Prekajski, who was running his fingers through his hair, shaking and taking his words to heart. He was trying to think of what to say. Paštrović looked around the room and seemed to be surprised that they were alone. He then burst out, "Where are the Gypsies? Bring back the Gypsies. I want to sing one of our songs and weep. A folk song from our parts, right Steva?"

Steva got up to leave, and Paštrović gulped down his drink and began slurring, "Oh my sweetheart, my heart is yours..."

"Shame on you, you've chased away our guests with your simple manners. Ha-ha, you look like a Chinaman!"

Paštrović's sunken, small eyes flared, his droopy moustache began to tremble and he threw a glass at her. She screamed and the glass shattered as it hit the light bulb above the table.

Prekajski quickly ran out, barely escaping Paštrović, who staggered after him into the darkness.

## VI

The following day, everyone scoured the streets in search of Paštrović, who seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

A day later, his brother-in-law, Joza Matić, came to say that Stipa had come to his farm, all battered and bruised. Now he's pestering them to give him farm clothing and a plough because he wants to work on the land and cut wood, even though it's not time yet, and says that the gentry has cut his roots and he doesn't want to live in town anymore. He is cursing his wife, and when they mention his daughter, he starts crying and begging them to not let her die of hunger.

When the town doctor and Prekajski went to bring him back, they found him bareheaded, dragging a torn-out acacia tree and trudging through muddy snow in knee-high rubber boots. He greeted them politely and, smiling, said that it would be a waste not to make firewood out of it, and commented on how fresh the air was on the farm; that he no longer has a headache and that he will start a new life here.

He laughed heartily at their attempt to persuade him into taking a ride with them.

"You think I'm crazy. I'm not, I tell you. I don't want to live with those bastards anymore," he said, spitting on the ground.

His was so convincing and level-headed that it cast a chill over them.

"But, what about Eržika, and your debts? The creditors have already held a meeting. Come, at least write down how you stand; we know you're not crazy."

He didn't reply, but he nevertheless climbed into the carriage.

As they passed through town, people were stopping in groups to stare at them. This annoyed him, so he began cursing, "What are you looking at, you bastards!"

He asked to stop by his home. But they told him that his wife left early that morning to visit her relatives in Tatra, and that she took Eržika with her. He became enraged. He stood up in the carriage, waving his fist, and shouted, in a voice hoarse with emotion, "The harlot, ungrateful wretch!"

Finally, he calmed down.

"I know you're taking me to the nuthouse," he said listlessly, drained of emotion.

They checked him into the town hospital for the night. They weren't sure who was going to pay for his treatment or which ward he would be assigned to at Schwartzer Sanatorium. He calmly had his dinner, allowed them to change his clothes, and then turned to the male nurse – "gunk-eyes" Đuka, who built himself a house by treating young people, on his own, without the knowledge of the doctors, and stealing drugs from the hospital and selling them at enormous prices – and asked him, in all seriousness, if he was steady on his feet and whether or not he thought he was really insane.

Đuka said “yes” to the first question, and “no” to the second, rattling a set of keys.

Early next morning, they found Dr. Paštrović lying on the floor in the middle of the room, in a pool of blood, with slashed wrists. His eyes were still moving, but even if he hadn’t lost so much blood, they wouldn’t be able to save him because the glass was smudged, in all probability poisonous.

Translated from the Serbian by

*Persida BOŠKOVIĆ*

STEVAN TONTIĆ

## FIVE POEMS

### A MESSAGE FROM AUSCHWITZ

God will need my forgiveness\*  
For letting me be turned,  
Without any guilt or being judged,  
Into a skeleton, a living crucifix.  
That is my last will,  
My message to the surviving humankind.  
God will not get to see it anyway.

How could He see it when He didn't see  
The horror that swept across the earth  
And brought down the bright skies,  
When He didn't see the crematorium  
That would send me, turned into smoke,  
To meet – Him!?

God will need my forgiveness.  
That is what I'll utter now,  
While I still breathe.

That and nothing more.

I said this, not yearning for revenge,  
Speaking the language of Job, man of God,  
The language of my nullified life  
And unconquered Self.

Let it be known.

2020

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\* Inscription found on a wall in Auschwitz.

## A FRIEND'S TROPHY

I had a friend, a dear friend,  
We shared good and evil,  
And in doing so we both, protecting the other,  
Gladly took the burden of evil.  
Nothing could separate us.

My Self and his Self  
Were, as they say, like nail and flesh.

And then, all of a sudden, war broke out,  
For which he blamed the neighbouring peoples,  
And some others, all except his own.

As soon as bullets started flying, he entered the tent  
Of the new national leader,  
While I stayed alone, taking no sides.

Then he started admonishing me  
For my unpardonable lack of patriotism,  
Shooting verbal arrows at me,  
Dipped in the blood of our brotherhood  
That had begun to cool down.  
I stored them in the quiver of my heart,  
Until my heart broke.

In the end, he started presenting me  
As a war trophy won in a just struggle  
For which he received the highest decorations.

He took them into his grave,  
Mourned as a great son of our people.

May his anguished soul rest in peace!

## WHILE LEAVING

While leaving, I'll be illuminated,  
Flooded by abundant light in which  
I never bathed alive,  
Even though in a dream, on the eve of great holidays,  
It solemnly promised itself to me.

And all of a sudden (contrary to all expectations),  
I'll be stunned by the mercy of existence  
Wherein I could participate  
Without anyone's recommendations, proven merits,  
Subscriber's privileges.

While leaving, I'll think  
(They don't call me Christ's fool in vain),  
Perhaps in those last, timeless moments,  
That those who tortured and humiliated me  
Believed they were doing me good  
And that a certain amount of good did enter  
My wondrous, though one could also safely say,  
Horrible life that way.

While leaving, I'll also remember those  
Who shot at me a number of times  
And missed regularly.  
I'll wave to them, my hapless do-gooders  
Who weren't up even to such  
A simple task.

Before leaving, I'll thank the Lord  
(Regardless of the rumours spread about Him)  
For having subjected me to the most difficult ordeals,  
Untold horrors, as well as the marvels of living  
Amongst murderers and living saints.

And I'll thank Satan personally  
For having wholeheartedly cooperated, without recompense,  
On the failed project of my fate,  
Which I pushed through  
To this happy ending.

## BROTHERS AND SISTERS

To the shade of my sister Sava

There were six of us, three brothers and three sisters.  
The youngest sister died first, then the oldest one,  
And in-between the oldest brother did.  
And now, the middle sister, the last living one has died.

(It is unbearably sad to say “the last sister”.  
Shouldn’t every man have at least one sister  
As long as he lives?)

Us two brothers still remain.  
I should say: I have one brother left,  
For I am not a brother to myself.

When, aged eighty-two,  
My third sister died,  
Those close to me and my neighbours started comforting me:  
That was a full human measure,  
She lived long enough, the poor soul.

She lived long enough! Long enough...

And each one of them personally believes  
That he or she should live forever.

So I myself occasionally think that Immortality  
Should not lose sight of me  
(Which is undoubtedly silly).

2017

## FATHER CORRECTS HERACLITUS

My father, a wise ploughman,  
Told me before he died  
That, in a certain matter, he corrected  
Even Heraclitus the Dark himself:

To say that one cannot enter  
The same river twice  
Is poor wisdom, after all,  
Attained even by one  
Who has never stepped into water.

And I say:  
The same man cannot  
Enter a river twice,  
For the moment he entered for the second time,  
He'd no longer be the one from the first entry.

As for you, go on diving  
Into the dark depths  
Of your favourite philosopher.  
But watch it – it's a slippery ground,  
Occasionally people get killed.

2020

Translated from Serbian by  
*Novica PETROVIĆ*

DRAGAN JOVANOVIĆ DANILOV

## SIX POEMS

### POEMS ARE MY LUNGS

Teachers, like roses, grow from the Balkan humus.  
A poet who is my teacher is fully entitled to killing me  
without his heart sinking. My faith has taken from my teachers  
all the force of a waterfall, although nothing I've written  
can soar to its terrible roar, behind nothingness, inside  
time. Everything that my teachers have written  
I've eaten on bread. And drunk with wine. On the stone heart  
of teachers I have sharpened these words, too. But now, my teachers,  
I swear, I no longer eat your flesh. A poem is full of words  
too heavy to be carried through mountains. A poem is  
that which remains inside a tunnel when all the earth has been dug out.  
Poems are my lungs and my insomnia. Each insomnia is  
historic. I'll part with money, not insomnia, for whenever it  
touches me, it brings me spring to start leafing and then disappear.  
When I write, I draw and frame apparitions. I get off my horse  
and drink from a stream. A wild river leads into motionlessness.  
Into a quiet season. Each great poem is written by the ashes  
that force us to exist. Not God. Others travel,  
God issues tickets and remains.

## NAKEDNESS

While burning rainforests of dictionaries, man gets the desire to speak.  
Speech should start from nakedness which is denied words.

People only know how to speak, they've forgotten they have a body.  
Nothing is measured by gain or loss, but by nakedness.

Gods took nakedness down to the ground lest they should be blinded  
by whiteness up there. Thus women anchored themselves in the arable  
fields of day to preach the Gospel of whiteness, to take us into glow,  
or lower us into the abyss. Nakedness, that is a balance which has  
got out of itself, lava that buries centuries. Nakedness and darkness  
are Siamese twins. It is only on our nakedness that nothing is  
visible. Come now, God, descend onto the ground so that you can see  
how difficult it is to be with nakedness here. With forlorn bird calls  
lost in the marshes whence winter will arrive soon. Nothing,  
not even your immortality, can hide that. Nakedness cannot be clothed  
in words, for nakedness is in nakedness. When he takes off his shiny

mantle,  
nakedness turns even a king into a man. We cannot meet the body of  
a woman we enjoyed for a second time, as Heraclitus's river does not  
flow in vain. When a pregnant woman is in labour, she makes waves  
and mourns the dead. The hand that rocks the cradle rocks the grave.

Birds sing  
as if they did not believe in the afterlife world. What nakedness feels is  
more important than what it knows. That is why nakedness lives. That  
is why,  
in a dream, all miracles are possible except one – being awake.

## SHADOWS

The hands of us all shake from that  
which is struggling to shake off their grip.

I am a witness to what I have neither seen  
nor heard.

I haven't set off from Ithaca yet,  
but I'm starting to feel nostalgic about you,  
blind alleys, blinder than even the bats  
flying over my childhood.

I'm not in myself but in you  
and in something even more distant.

The shadows I drag behind me are  
too heavy – they walk beside me,  
and the ground shakes under them.

Shadows are actually words,  
breathed out rather than spoken.

It's better not to think about it.

## DARK LECHERY

Across the sand dunes, we approach ourselves mutely.  
Infinity is possible only in the mouth,  
what is uttered is only that which has been left out!  
I have no more solemn, too sonorous stanzas.  
Now my voice is made up of a dark mirror  
broken in a blind eye – a far-off land  
untouched by a gaze.

I am in dreams the way others are in the world.  
My snowy words have taken me inward,  
where unknown voices resound and ground waters  
roar; there I found everything  
that I left here; I recognised the spider  
weaving a net with its spidery tongue in some corner  
of the room as a dependable interpreter of my poems.

I know quite well the secret epic of giving up.  
I tremble in my body, which I have nowhere to leave,  
so I enter even more deeply into the dark wood.  
Softly, the way a saint takes off her clothes, the wind blows,  
turning our days into sand dunes; tomorrow,  
our bodies will already be gone from the bitter ruin  
of embraces; we are increasingly further away from joy and only  
fear still greets us with open hands;  
we are naked and alone in the icy waste where  
only dark lechery grows.

## IN THE MARKET PLACE IN HERCEG NOVI

Mimosas in bloom have walked out  
of their shady yards  
and now shine in the morning with some women,  
white and blooming like Baghdad.

In my dream I became aware that I'd stumbled  
on that market place in the lovely town of Herceg Novi,  
and here I am making my way, sliding like an otter  
in-between the stalls.

What do these young roosters, their legs tied,  
mean in an empty time?  
These baskets with anchovies, tender greens,  
figs, dates, pomegranates piled  
in heaps, or wine that lives longer than us?

What Babylonian chaos is this during  
these melancholy morning hours?  
A child's gaze, touching encounters,  
gulls' cries above the glittering sea –  
one cannot take it in one's hands.

And these words which you gild with your eyes.  
Poems are not written, anyway –  
they burst into flames, the way illness does.

## LET OUR EMBRACE NEVER RIPEN

They say: sunset, that's kitsch!  
And what can be lovelier than sunset  
above this water where we are wantonly  
lazing and playing with the palms of our hands?

This winter has turned into a blazing hot summer –  
I see only you in this Babylonian  
brickyard, and that is why my eyes are otherworldly beautiful.

We make a very understandable mistake – we do not travel  
anywhere from this delta – we have no need  
to get to know the world – we have each other.

We are twins, and our sins are music.  
If only this blueness could remember us,  
so gentle and dedicated to each other.

Let our embrace never ripen,  
for whatever ripens can no longer maintain  
a balance, so it swims in wantonness.

And let death leave our hearts  
on this gilded water, open so that no secret  
remains, not even in seashells.

They say sunset's kitsch!  
And what can be nicer than sunset  
and palms that know how to caress.  
Can we die at all while our  
hands are in each other?

Translated from the Serbian by  
*Novica PETROVIĆ*

## JELENA LENGOLD

### TIME

“There was a story about this traveling salesman whose left wrist began to hurt him, just under his wristwatch. When he removed the watch, blood spurted out. The wound showed the imprints of very tiny teeth.”

Julio Cortázar

#### 1.

I dreamt of a ball, again. In truth, I’m not sure what I’m dreaming about, I’ve never seen all of it, but it looks like a ball. Let’s say, something like a light brown ball. It’s uneven, with creases, craters, and dents. Like a giant orange. All I do in the dream is look at those creases and reach out my arms towards them. I want to touch the ball. I don’t know if I ever do. I never remember that part. This thing, it’s huge, it comforts me and fills me with awe. Its canals are deep and branched, like a satellite image of a mysterious planet. This thing is strong and powerful, it’s a force above all forces, it’s just, and it doesn’t scare me.

I don’t dream about it often, this ball. But I’ve been dreaming about it ever since I can remember. I dreamt about it as a child, and still do, even though I’m almost sixty years old. My friend Kolja claims it’s a prenatal dream. He says I’m dreaming about floating around in my mother’s womb. I don’t like it. I don’t like simple explanations. In fact, I don’t like explanations in general. Sometimes I think we live in an arrogant time that believes everything can and must be explained. And that it’s only a question of when or at what level of scientific progress everything will be explained. This time despises the former time when mystical attributes were ascribed to unexplained phenomena. A light flies across the sky – a miracle, a sign from the gods. Today, they immediately

tell you the name of the comet, its trajectory, and when it will be appearing again. An arrogant time, to be sure. Someone out there is probably roaring with laughter at all those scientific explanations.

So, I dreamt of the ball and woke up. It was Saturday. When the weather is bad, like it is today, there's not much for me to do on a Saturday. I could read, cook something simple, listen to music or watch a game on television. Just the same, the day will go by quickly. And since I knew that, I rushed to make myself some soup at least, before it gets dark.

Kolja called around noon. Unlike me, he has certain obligations towards his family, although, at our age, these obligations are almost symbolic. The children are all grown up. Things are pretty much routine. Once we lug home the vegetables from the market and take out the garbage, no one really needs us anymore. Everything else can go on without us. And that's good. This is why Kolja says he'll drop by after dinner. He doesn't mind the cold light rain that's slowly turning to snow. Kolja likes to spend a few hours in a world where neither women nor children nor pets set the schedule.

Even though he arrived after he had already eaten dinner, Kolja joined me for some tomato soup. He always says I cook better than all the women who cooked for him.

“This is because there is no arbitrariness in your carrot cubes. They're small, precise, and chopped with an understanding of the fact that the pieces of carrot in the soup must not be either crushed or too big. They must be exactly as big as they are on this plate! My friend, I would be able to explain this to very few women without being declared a nit-picker.”

“Which you truly are,” I laughed.

“Whatever. But your soup is superb,” Kolja concluded, wiping his mouth with a napkin, looking satisfied, and pouring beer from a can for both of us.

The two of us seldom watch television together, and we rarely go for walks, and rarely still play chess. Most of the time, we sit turned towards the terrace, with our feet up on chairs, and observe the city. Sometimes Kolja would insert a CD and let the music play, never too loud. Basically, he was a man who loved silence. We agreed on that. As we did on many other things. We could have long and pleasant talks about anything and everything, but we could just as well sit in silence, without a shred of awkwardness.

The days were already short at this time of year. The afternoon had scarcely begun, and it was already difficult to make out the bare linden trees we were observing. I never really hated autumn because it stopped the constant summer noise below my window. The rain and wind drove all the elated people, given to a variety of games, into their

apartments. Only the gloomy and disciplined dog walkers would show up sometimes, wrapped in scarves and hoods.

“It’s getting dark already,” said Kolja, as though he had read my mind. “Just a moment ago, it was morning, and we were making plans to see each other.”

“That’s right,” I said, realizing I have had or heard this conversation a thousand times already. “The older we get, the faster the time goes by. Remember how long summer vacation used to be?”

Kolja was nodding his head:

“Endless, yes. You could fit a whole lifetime between the end of the school year and the following autumn.”

“And how the weekends lasted and lasted, we were able to go away, visit friends, come back, tidy up and have time left over to read all the newspapers...”

Kolja lowered his feet, turned towards me, and placed his glass on the coffee table next to him. Everything indicated that he wanted to tell me something important.

“You know,” he said, “I have a theory, but you have to promise me you won’t think I’m flat out crazy.”

“We’ve solved that problem a long time ago, you are flat out crazy.”

“All right. Let’s say I am crazy. But, listen to me. I believe, truly believe, that it’s not just our impression. I think that time has really come to be shorter.”

He was looking at me, waiting to hear what I was going to say. One of his eyelids was a little lower than the other. I wondered how long it has been that way and how hadn’t I noticed it until now.

“Well, yes, we’ve already agreed on that. We’re probably organizing our responsibilities differently now. Or we have a different perception of time. Which is a bit unusual, since we sleep much less now than when we were young, but still...”

“No, no,” interrupted Kolja, “I don’t mean our subjective feeling. I’m talking about a genuine, concrete, and objective shortening of time.”

“Something like, a day doesn’t have twenty-four hours anymore?” I laughed.

“Not quite, but something like that. A day still lasts twenty-four hours but time is different than before. It’s less now.”

“And no one noticed this before you?”

“On the contrary, I believe everyone has noticed. But they all say the same things you just did: time is going by more quickly; our lives are more dynamic; we all sit at our computers, blah, blah, blah... They’re just deluding themselves. It’s got nothing to do with a dynamic lifestyle. Time goes by more quickly even for people who do nothing.”

“I have to ask you again, has anyone other than you realized this?”

“I’m convinced there are other people, but no one is willing to say it out loud. It’s just one of those things you keep secret.”

“Hmm. And why is it kept a secret?”

“I’ve no idea. Maybe we’re not ready to face it. Imagine what would happen if people knew time was shorter?”

“Panic, probably.”

“Well, yes. Panic. And anger. Because life is already short. And then, let’s say, we realize that we’re being deprived of the time we thought we had. People are simply not supposed to know.”

“Kolja, have you been watching shows on those science channels? About, let’s say, the space-time curvature, Einstein’s theory versus quantum physics, why time exists and where it came from, what if time has another dimension...”

He ignored my attempt. He put his feet back on the chair and turned to look outside again. By now it was completely dark.

“Saturday is over,” said Kolja, as the only conclusion to his little fantastic realization.

Later, when he was at the door, leaving to go home, I asked him if there was a way he could prove that time had become shorter.

“I don’t know, but I’ll think of something. I’m sure it exists.”

## 2.

Twice a week, I would go for an afternoon swim. I assured myself that in doing so I was compensating, at least a little, for the fact that my life was spent mostly in an armchair, a bed, or a car. So, I would go and swim for an hour and a half, which was the duration of the afternoon session. You would think that was plenty of time for a man my age to get tired, especially if he spends most of his session swimming the front crawl vigorously. But, the big pool clock on the wall was inexorably approaching seven. I was disappointed, every time. I wanted to swim longer. There, in that place, immersed in pleasant lukewarm water, surrounded by warm air that smelled faintly of chlorine, I thought that I really understood best what Kolja was talking about. The hour and a half went by unacceptably quickly. An hour and a half, this used to be, say, two classes at school. Those ninety-minute classes would last forever. We weren’t allowed a recess during these classes. We would look at the clock just like I’m looking at the clock each time I reach the other side of the pool and make a turn. Back then, at school, we had a round clock hanging on the wall with hands that moved slowly. Today, hanging on the pool wall is a digital clock large enough so that you can clearly see the time from anywhere in the pool, even when your eyes are filled with water. The dots move silently and the three becomes a four, the four

becomes a five, and the minutes fly one after another. I stopped, grabbed the edge of the pool with one hand to rest, and stared at the numbers on the clock. Is there, I thought, some method that could somehow allow us to pause for a moment? Not forever, of course, but at least for a while? Could I, if I really concentrated hard, stop a moment in time? I was sorry that Kolja wasn't there because a strange thought went through my head and I knew that in a day or two I wouldn't be able to summon it again, and it was something that I could only ask him. I mean, if we can't stop a moment in time, do things work that way at all? Maybe time is actually in the moment and not the other way around? Two swings of the arms through the water and this thought was no longer clear to me either.

The spot where I park my car while I'm at the pool has a two-hour limit. I barely make it, every time. The half an hour I don't spend swimming, I lose climbing the stairs, taking the pass out of my wallet, undressing, showering, drying my hair, getting dressed, going down the stairs, wrapping a shawl around my neck... I always arrive at the last minute but, mostly, I get there on time. Those thirty minutes also fly by. Always in the same, inevitable direction. As I unlocked my car and drove out of an almost empty parking lot of the Sports Center, I remembered how packed it was just two hours ago and that I barely managed to find a parking space. And now everything was empty again. There is no way for me to align the situation in the parking lot with the moment in which I need an empty parking space. And they're always talking about the entropy of the universe. Supposedly, it's increasing day by day, although it's not at all clear to me how someone can know or claim something like that, or how the entropy of the universe would even be measured? But, even if all this were true, even if entropy really increases, how is it that time still moves only in one direction? I mean, how is it possible that only this one phenomenon withstands general entropy?

One of the last thoughts I remember before falling asleep that night was that I don't really believe in entropy.

### 3.

On Tuesday, Kolja sent me a short and mysterious message. *Be at home around five. I'm bringing proof.* It took me a few seconds to realize what he was referring to. Proof? Of what? And then I remembered. A part of me laughed at the childish side of Kolja's being, who would now, it seems, enjoy having a secret club that meets in some dark corner of a park. And yet, that other part of me could hardly wait for Kolja to arrive and finally see what kind of proof he had. My reservoir

of good sense was telling me that such evidence simply could not exist. Because, if it really existed, someone much smarter than the two of us would have discovered it a long time ago. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter after four. By the time I finish washing the dishes, he'll be here. There you go, sometimes it's good that time goes by quickly.

"Turn on the computer and bring your stopwatch," he said as soon as he came in.

I turned on the computer.

"I don't have a stopwatch, never did..."

He looked at me with reproach, and by the expression on his face, I could see disapproval because I take everything lightly.

"You don't have a stopwatch? Hmm. All right. The cell phone will have to do. I've already measured everything at home with a stopwatch."

He took a flash drive out of his pocket and inserted it into my computer. He gestured to me to sit down. As if a lecture was about to start.

"Here's what I have," Kolja began. "What I will show you is the original recording from the Olympic Games in Berlin, on August 3, 1936. That's right, the famous Olympic Games when Hitler sat in the stands, and Jesse Owens, to Hitler's horror, won four gold medals. I'll play you a video of the 100-meter dash that he won and you try to measure the race time on your phone. Ready?"

In the meantime, I realized that I also have a stopwatch on my phone.

"Ready," I said, "I guess I can manage."

I was eager to find out where this story of his was going.

"Start the stopwatch the moment the starter gives the signal, and try to catch the exact moment when Owens reaches the finish line. Don't worry, we'll measure it a few times, as many as needed."

"Okay. Start the video."

The first two or three times I missed both the starter signal and the finish line, but then I finally got it. We measured once, twice, three times.

"Somewhere around sixteen seconds," I said finally. "I can't really determine exactly, I'm looking at the phone and, at the same time, I'm looking at the video..."

Kolja was nodding his head.

"I measured it many times. It's 15.59 seconds exactly."

I still didn't know what he was proving.

"All right, and what does this have to do with time?"

Kolja then showed me a webpage of the Olympic Games.

"Look," he said. "Jesse Owens ran the 100 in 10.3 seconds."

"But how is this possible?"

We were both looking at the paused black and white video and the scoreboard with the numbers 10.3.

“Are you sure this video is correct?”

“Positive,” Kolja nodded. “There are several versions of this race on the net, they didn’t do as much recording in those days, but if you compare them, they’re all the same, they all lead to the same conclusion.”

“And this conclusion is?”

He went into the kitchen and took two beers out of the fridge. He poured them and placed the glasses in front of us.

“You can put the phone down now, you don’t need to measure anything anymore, I’ll explain everything. Listen. The race we just saw took place exactly eighty years and some three months ago. Back then, on August 3, 1936, the race lasted 10.3 seconds. Today, on November 8, 2016, the same race lasts 15.59 seconds. In the meantime, time grew shorter, unnoticeably, little by little, with each passing day it was shorter by one second. It’s unlikely that you would notice a missing second in a day, it’s very easy to miss. But, after eighty years, it adds up. Back in 1936, a day lasted 86.400 seconds, the same as today, but in *those* seconds. Today, in 2016, a day is shorter by exactly 29.317 of those seconds. Are you following me?”

“I guess, yes... Continue.”

“This means that today a second is a third shorter than it was back then. And that now a day is two-thirds of what it used to be back then. Today, a day is about eight hours shorter than 80 years ago.”

After this explanation, we both just sat for a while, drinking beer in silence. There was no use asking him if he was sure about all this because it was obvious that he was. It didn’t even make sense to say how crazy all this sounds because he and I knew it. And at the same time, no matter how incredible it all was, it explained so much. All those people who say they don’t get as much sleep as they would like. Those times when dawn came faster than I expected. Autumns that, like this one, arrived no sooner than the previous ended. The moment when I tear a sheet off a calendar because another month has passed. And I always think, *already*, and then, like a man who doesn’t know where and what he spent his money on, I try to remember what had occupied me so much during the past month that I didn’t even realize that time has passed. Flown by.

“Kolja, tell me, compared to when we were kids, when, let’s say, we were ten, how much shorter is a day now?”

He did some adding and subtracting, clicked on his calculator, and then said:

“Here, if we take this day and go back fifty years, the day was exactly 5 hours and 7 minutes longer than today.”

I didn’t know what time it would have been back then, fifty years ago, but now, on this day, the evening once again came too quickly.

“I wish I had never found this out,” I said. “I don’t see how I could possibly benefit from this knowledge.”

“There is no benefit. Knowledge is overrated. You have some facts, but that still doesn’t mean you can change anything.”

“Even before this, I had the feeling time was slipping away, and if this is true, I guess it’s not just a feeling. And what are we supposed to do now?”

“There’s nothing we can do,” said Kolja. “At some point, in our youth, we allowed ourselves ease, as if there was some immeasurable infinity in front of us. Ease is a big trap, isn’t it?”

#### 4.

I just have to forget all this. It won’t be the first or the last thing that I have consciously decided to drive into some part of the mind that serves for such things. For waste, for the irreparable, for what I no longer want to remember. That’s what went through my head that night, in the dark, as I tried to calculate how many of *those* hours I would have slept if I sleep for six hours now. I have to forget all this as if it never even happened, otherwise I will constantly be doing calculations. Time may not be the most important thing we have. I turned on the light above my head and looked for my watch on the night table. Then I remembered that I also needed glasses if I wanted to see what time it was, so I looked for them as well. Without glasses, everything is blurry.

And then, because of those glasses, some strange thought came to me. Another in a line of thoughts that I won’t be able to repeat to Kolja tomorrow, or the next day, because it was too confusing, very far removed from all his theories supported by numbers and evidence. What if time isn’t a dimension at all? I thought. What if time is an organism that ages and shrinks, just like my eyeball? What if every cell of time withers on the same principle that every cell in my body withers? Does this mean that time will come to an end one day, that it will simply die? In the time of ancient Egypt, the average life expectancy was about thirty years, but who knows how long those thirty years actually lasted? Maybe it all comes down to the same thing. Life expectancy is seemingly increasing while time is dying.

There was something comical about it all, I thought in the dark. If I were to tell Kolja all this, and if I were to remind him of the fact that there are certain parts of the body, like our ears or nose, that are the only things that don’t shrink but grow our entire lives, which is why we have those shriveled little old men with big, swinging ears; if I told him all that, would he start looking for a place in the world where time

isn't getting shorter? Maybe these places, I thought, were the ones where people are unreasonably carefree and happy? Of course they're happy; they have so much time at their disposal. If we've lost five hours of our day in the last fifty years, who knows how many hours they've gained? A sunset that lasts three hours? A day that lasts thirty hours, and they're not even aware of it? Maybe Cuba? They're happy there. At least that's what I've heard. If I told Kolja this, he would start looking for such a place in the world; he wouldn't rest until he finds out whether it was true.

But even that is pointless. Because, when that old man dies, his big and happy ears, which grew carefree while he was shrinking, will also die. And he will definitely die. As I will now, most definitely, fall asleep. That's the only thing I have control over. The only thing I can decide. I can't even choose a dream. I'd love to dream of a long day in Cuba, but that probably won't happen. It will probably be the way it always is – I wake up and don't remember a thing. Just like that. A few hours of not being here, a few hours of not existing anywhere.

Translated from Serbian by

*Persida BOŠKOVIĆ*

RADOVAN VUČKOVIĆ

## THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF *A CHRONICLE OF A PROVINCIAL CEMETERY*

*Travel Companions*, a book of prose by Isidora Sekulić, appeared in Serbian literature at a time (1911) when the avant-garde and the desire for new ways of writing were gradually beginning to take shape. The prose style was also undergoing changes: instead of jagged realistic descriptions of situations and characters, a linear composition and a tightly connected plot flow, authors focused on illuminating the personal dispositions of morally and intellectually oversensitive individuals and capturing their fantasies, premonitions and unhinged state of mind in short and pulsating sentences.<sup>1</sup> *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, the second collection of short stories by Isidora Sekulić, was published almost three decades after the first, at a time (1940) when the avant-garde was on the wane and when its main representatives were returning to classical narrative techniques while attempting to incorporate the novelties they previously mastered. Even the title of her second collection of short stories indicates that she was reviving the narrative of chronicles, which was unacceptable in all avant-garde movements, as foreign as realistic portrayals of characters in long-form narratives. From today's perspective, they were two different narrative poetics and two incompatible narrative techniques.

Such differences resulted in changes in literature which took place over a period of three turbulent decades in the first half of the twentieth century. Owing to the impact of the so-called social literature of the thirties, topics and narrative techniques, which were previously radically contested and rejected, returned to the scene. Nevertheless, these changes are evident more in the outer structure or formal composition

<sup>1</sup> R. Vučković, *Moderna srpska proza*, Beograd, 1990, pp. 454-470.

of the works and less in the inner core of the subject matter. For, in spite of the differences between the two works of prose by Isidora Sekulić, written in two different time periods, they are linked by the same philosophy of life, a melancholic awareness of the transience of human life, an analytical unsentimental approach to themes and motifs and an essayistic style of contemplating the contradictions of human destiny. With these traits, the narrative work of Isidora Sekulić rose above the ephemeral developments in literature, spanning over three decades, and moved closer to the works of the most famous prose writers of the time, who had gone down a similar path of development and joined the unique treasury of Modernism.

However, a literary historian must explain both the differences and the similarities in the work of the same author. Therefore, he also cannot negate the differences that exist between *Travel Companions* and *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, which can be interpreted in various ways. All the same, the most convincing interpretation is the one that entails broader relationships and processes in literature and takes into consideration the key ideas and figures of a particular period both in our country and the world. From this perspective, the different form and content of *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, in relation to *Travel Companions*, resulted from the abandonment of a radical experiment, the development of a different spiritual and cultural atmosphere prior to World War II, the acceptance of a rational attitude towards life phenomena, and new appreciation for the achievements of fundamental science as something that can be used both in artistic and literary practices. Previous experiences with the avant-garde had taught many of those who came after or took part in it that it is possible to incorporate technical innovations of Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism into standard methods. One such innovation was the documentary method or the technique of montage, which enabled the use of various material, written or quasi-documents, in order to make a story appear more convincing and at the same time substantiate the belief of the Surrealists: that a true to life fact is more poetic and exciting than an artificial literary product and aestheticized reality. And so the documentary or montage technique came to be commonly used in works of prose and plays written in the thirties, even by those who challenged the validity of the radical experiment. Plays written by Bertolt Brecht represent an eloquent example; he incorporated the technique into the structure of his dramatic works, and this was the foundation for the development of his principles and the epic theatre.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the naturalistic theory of family development, which ultimately leads to the degeneration of the strong biological substance

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<sup>2</sup> R. Vučković, *Moderna drama*, Sarajevo, pp. 118-123.

of wealthy ancestors, was once again restored in the prose and, to a certain extent, the dramatic works of the thirties. But after it had flourished and developed in the well-known works of Mann, du Gard, Galsworthy and Gorky, the theory lost the aggressiveness of social and biological determinism characteristic of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series. The theory broke away from Zola's version the most in Marcel Proust's novel in seven volumes entitled *In Search of Lost Time*. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, in his novel *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann also shifts the problem of inheritance and degeneration from the crude biological sphere to man's mental and spiritual development. He shows how the hereditary factor in a family chain manifests itself in a web of inexplicable relationships, deviations, mental refinement, perversions, extravagancy, dimming and flashes of consciousness. The line of inheritance is not deterministically straight, but rather a curve and it is reflected in works of prose as various meanders which display the incomprehensibility of human nature and the elusiveness of its design. With such notions of inheritance and changes in middle-class families, Thomas Mann was comparable to Ibsen and similarly, he introduced symbolic details that point out deeper abysses in the human soul. At the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties, Krleža re-established the concept of Ibsen's dramas in his series of plays about the Gembays, though he did broaden it in the prose sections, bringing it closer to the European tradition of genealogical novels.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Mann, however, was the European author who exhausted the possibilities of the genealogical novel to the fullest and presented forms of family degeneration and decline. In his epic tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers*, published in the period from 1926 to 1942, with commentaries, Mann introduced the Old Testament as a stage where a family drama from the primeval beginnings unfolds. By using ironic, humorous and parodic persiflage, he wanted to show, among other things, how a hereditary chain progresses and changes over an incomprehensibly long time, how the process repeats itself, thus thinning out and reducing the chain, which would then lose its former strength and robustness, and dissolve in descendants of refined blood and artistic preferences. To some extent, the tetralogy about Joseph is an expansion of the novel *Buddenbrooks* into the field of mythology, so that the writer's reflection on the relationship between fathers and children is reintroduced – now in a sovereign tone of a writer before whom a specific historical time has vanished and he floats with ease on a nebula of the past, without forgetting to make observations similar to those when he talks about the middle-class family of his time: "Looking through

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<sup>3</sup> R. Vučković, *Krležina dela*, Sarajevo, 1986, pp. 159-208.

a kaleidoscope is very informative; because the little pieces and pebbles that formed the picture of Jacob's life will be arranged in a completely different order for his son, which will be richer, more complex, but also worse. Joseph is a doleful case, but also more difficult, painful and interesting, so that the basic foundations of his father's earlier life can barely be discerned in the form in which they reappear in his son's life.”<sup>4</sup>

On one occasion, when Isidora Sekulić touched on the subject of Thomas Mann, she emphasized this fundamental idea of his, which dominates both the novel *Buddenbrooks* and the tetralogy about Joseph. At that time, she pointed out the emergence of artistic inclinations among the more complex and sensitive souls of the descendants at a time of lassitude and financial decline: “Cultural history reveals a secret: that, for the most part, artistic talents and ideas arise, both in families and in nations, at a time when wealth begins to dwindle. When health and possessions decline across generations of a family line; when the political and economic power of a state grows weak, standing over the ruins is a spirit that grows stronger, artistic and spiritual strength... The great German writer, Thomas Mann, maintains the theory in its literal sense, from his first, autobiographical novel *Buddenbrooks*, to his last novel *Doctor Faustus*.<sup>5</sup>

This concept of a genealogical novel, best explicated in the works of T. Mann, constitutes the framework of Isidora Sekulić's novellas in her book *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, particularly the four novellas in the first edition (*Kosta Earthquake*, *Mrs. Nola*, *The Vlaovićes*, and *Ambitions, Smoke*). It is hard to imagine that an attentive reader such as she did not follow Mann's great novelistic opus, written and published at the same time as her novellas in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*. However, Mann's tetralogy about Joseph could not have been as inspiring for Isidora Sekulić as his novel *Buddenbrooks*. She aspired to write a book which would be the result of direct experiences and observations in a small town. Of course, the setting in which she places her heroes is that of a small town in Vojvodina and not a German merchant town with a developed middle-class with worldly manners and business connections, as is the case with Mann. The effect of the milieu on the downfall of prominent families was equally fatal in both cases.

Thus, there can be no doubt that the model of family decline from *Buddenbrooks* was closest to Isidora Sekulić and she adhered to it in her chronicles, especially in the novella *The Vlaovićes*. In this novella, the author almost literally transposes the thoughts she expressed about T. Mann: that spiritual and artistic inclinations emerge in the descendants

<sup>4</sup> T. Man, *Legenda o Josipu*, Rijeka, 1960, pp. 931-932.

<sup>5</sup> I. Sekulić, “Ivana Gundulića ‘Suze sina razmetnoga’”, *Kritički radovi*, Novi Sad/Beograd, 1977, p. 111.

of prominent families in the process of their economic and biological decline. The Buddenbrooks are an ideal example of this theory. Namely, even Thomas Buddenbrook, in spite of being rational and businesslike, mindful of family tradition and aware of his family's significance, its worthy representative – exhibited, quite early on, a tendency towards extravagance, which was not characteristic of his ancestors, by marrying Gerda, a strange and problematic creature who loved music, played the violin and enjoyed reading. This extravagant streak develops into grotesque bitterness in the character of Thomas's only son, Johann "Hanno" Buddenbrook, who approaches music with a kind of sick longing and absolute devotion. Because of this, he is a dreamer, distracted and incapable of focusing on his schoolwork and the serious matters of the merchant business. Senator Buddenbrook's efforts to turn the attention of his sickly, delicate son towards the family business and arouse his interest in trading or anything practical and useful, are all in vain. The Senator's efforts to shift Hanno's interest were thwarted by music: "But now that he saw how her passion for music, strange to his own nature, utterly, even at this early age, possessed the child, he felt in it a hostile force that came between him and his son, of whom his hopes would make a Buddenbrook – a strong and practical-minded man, with definite impulses after power and conquest."<sup>6</sup> The ideal Thomas aspires to reach, while still hoping to change the behaviour and character of his only son, was the boy's great-grandfather, "whom he himself had known as a boy": "a clear-sighted man, jovial, simple, humorous, sturdy."<sup>7</sup> But, Hanno is turning into the complete opposite. Dreamy, disconnected, lacking vigor and energy, he sinks into a state of lethargy which, in the end, after an intense session of making music, sends him to his death and shatters all illusions of reviving the roots and the economic power of the once powerful Buddenbrooks.

Instead, a powerful family meets its demise and death triumphs, erasing the members of a great family drama and all their attempts to consolidate and restore their former greatness and happiness. First, the Senator's mother dies in the agony of pneumonia, and then he dies of a common tooth ailment, leaving behind for a short time his erring, devoted-to-music and feeble only son, Hanno. At the end of the novel, in the last chapter, we witness a scene of a family gathering, which is about to disperse like after a colossal shipwreck. After losing her husband and son, Gerda, the Senator's wife, is preparing to return to her parent's home. The other Misses Buddenbrook are also there, appalled after hearing how the hermaphroditic Kai, a nobleman, kissed his friend

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<sup>6</sup> T. Man, *Budenbrokovi, II*, Beograd, 1978, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

Hanno's hands over and over again on his deathbed. News that Thomas's extravagant brother, Christian, a bohemian and a theatre lover, was confined to a mental institution makes this story of the decline of the wealth and former family glory of the Buddenbrooks even more tragic. There is nothing left, but a grotesque story ending in a scene with aged and chatty women without men.

The chronicles of Isidora Sekulić end in a similar fashion. The difference is that the plot is played out in a small town in Vojvodina and that the characters are often small people without the halo of glory and middle-class power. Isidora Sekulić's heroes usually come from small villages, take root in a town, manage to rise up in the first generation and gain wealth and power, and then as early as the second generation, begin to lose ground until in the end they completely deteriorate, decline and disappear into oblivion and nothingness. On this journey downhill, some of them try to swerve in the right direction and avoid their inevitable doom, but without success. The main character in the novella *Kosta Earthquake*, an unsightly caricature of a man, marries a peasant girl in order to strengthen his biological roots, but he fails to change anything – his children lose their life compass, become creatures in human form and like him, disappear in the end without a trace. The only testimonies of their existence are their gravestones. Thus, Isidora Sekulić's chronicles can be discussed in terms of grotesque realism which characterized some of the prose works of the thirties. The straitened circumstances of a small town and its smallminded townspeople could not serve as a background for the tragic gestures inherent in the characters of this type of genealogical prose. Perhaps the grotesque was the only solution and possibility for its development in newer times, which our author sensed and presented well in her chronicles.

This is most evident in her most authentic family chronicle, *The Vlaovićes*, which also comes closest to the genealogical model in Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*. That is to say, based on the choice of characters and the many similarities with Mann's famous novel, the novella gives the impression that it is a kind of parody in which a lengthy family story is textually reduced and thus crushed, the same way the townspeople attempted to put on a big middle-class performance and ended up like caricatures in a grotesque folk theatre. Isidora Sekulić writes her story about the Vlaovićes in her own way and in keeping with the writing style and documentary method in the prose works of the thirties. First, she informs the reader about a family grave, which one of them had bought in a nearby town out of spite after a quarrel with a priest. The family grave is full to the very top and the only two family members that remained are a brother and his sister, both

eccentrics. The narrator then goes back to the past and reconstructs the family history. Kornel Vlaović was the first wealthy ancestor. He lived in a village, learned to read and write, became wealthy and behaved like an arrogant despot: from the Saturday vigil to the end of the service on Sunday, in his home only whispers were allowed and not a single harsh word was to be uttered. His son Marko was a man of a “robust frame”, but he was extremely afraid of illness and spent much of his time visiting hospitals – because he wanted to familiarize himself with illness. Two of his sons died and the third, Stefan, showed signs of illness: he was frail, an odd character obsessed with music; he didn’t play an instrument, but he could feel the music with every inch of his being and experienced sound as if it were light. He spent his time with birds and books, with no interest for the family business. His two children also illustrate the abovementioned theory with regard to Thomas Mann’s works: that economic decline and biological weakening amplify artistic inclinations. His son Josif inherited his love of music, but also his bizarre melancholy and rashness, and he would beat his sister Leksa in fits of anger. She on the other hand, was capable in spirit but physically, she was a degenerating descendant of the once strong Vlaovićes: “With a crooked shoulder, perhaps even from hardship, always flustered from the silent suffering and the fear, withered and grey, completely withdrawn, she was but a shadow of the Vlaovićes, an irrelevant, final trace of a whole line of strong and robust men.”<sup>8</sup> The author presents this theory within the narrative, as a commentary (which is a drawback). She explicitly emphasizes that “the cultural skills of the Vlaovićes developed swiftly over the last two or three generations, but the family, as an entity, and the land were deteriorating rapidly.”<sup>9</sup> She goes on to say: “As if it were not a rule and standard behavior on this Earth for all families to be drained by the last ridiculous and pathetic descendants... This is the law of the overall history of mankind: all that is strong and great ends in tragedy or comedy.”<sup>10</sup>

The two remaining descendants of the Vlaović family, brother and sister, play out the tragedy or comedy, that is to say, tragicomedy and grotesque of the final members of a large family procession, which is extinguished in disease, eccentricity, aggressiveness but also artistic oversensitivity. Compared to similar characters of great European genealogical novels, including those in Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, they are in an even more devastating position, as they were lowered into the very mud of life, whereby our author’s abridged and crushed form of a family chronicle seems to imply the end of a concept, which today is

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<sup>8</sup> Isidora Sekulić, *Kronika palanačkog groblja*, Novi Sad, 1962, p. 252.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 259.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 252.

also virtually impossible. The twitch and grimace of its characters, their often freakish exterior and unilaterally and pathologically extracted spirituality, followed by the documentary or montage technique of narration, bring to mind works, both dramatic and novelistic, of another great European writer who was popular in the thirties: Luigi Pirandello. But for Isidora Sekulić, the bridge to Pirandello pertains, at most, to the philosophy of relativism and paradoxical expressions of human actions and destiny. This philosophy gained a firm foothold on the scene of European and world culture of the thirties and succeeded and replaced the chiliastic and futuristic concepts of Futurism and Expressionism, which were based on the dominance of one truth. Isidora Sekulić who, in her *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, contemplates the inevitability of change, the fleetingness and gradual disappearance of established truths, institutions, moral norms and proven values in the time sequence of the dissolution of a family, had to have discerned this philosophy as her own, and thus integrated it into her narrative writing.

Relativism, however, is not a philosophy that can be limited only to the literature and time frame of a decade, but rather to a central idea of the first half of the twentieth century, best formulated in Einstein's theory of relativity. But it achieved full recognition in literature in the late twenties and thirties. This was when it became generally accepted in literature. And yet rarely did it have such a stimulating effect on shaping a personal view on life and the world and establishing unique techniques of writing dramas and novellas, as in the case of Pirandello. He was slightly older than Thomas Mann and by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, Pirandello had a substantial opus, but his real great rise in the world occurs in the twenties and thirties, when he finds himself among the most significant figures, who mark the spirit of an epoch and have a crucial influence on many writers of various genres and viewpoints. In Yugoslavia, during this period, endeavours in drama and theatre, and in theoretical contemplations, were inconceivable without referring to or mentioning Pirandello.<sup>11</sup> He inspired different writers in this part of the world to support his relativistic thinking and paradoxical anthropology and discover their own solutions through his theories and structural techniques.<sup>12</sup> Ivo Andrić even translated one of Pirandello's novellas, while we can

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<sup>11</sup> To read in more detail about the presence and influence of Pirandello in Serbian and Croatian literature, see my book *Moderna drama*. Josip Kulundžić's attitude towards Pirandello's drama concepts is especially interesting. (R. Vučković, *Moderna drama*, pp. 345-376).

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting how almost all of the most significant writers in Sarajevo, between two world wars, modelled themselves on Pirandello. Pirandello is discussed and reviewed. Literary critic, Jovan Kršić, wrote about the famous Italian several times, and recognized his influence in the dramas of B. Jevtić, I. Samokovlija, J. Palavestra,

assume that another novella by Pirandello served as an example when he wrote the story *On the Sunny Side*.<sup>13</sup>

Isidora Sekulić wrote about Pirandello as far back as the twenties. At that time (1926), she published her essay *Relativitet u delu L. Pirandela* (Relativity in the work of L. Pirandello) in the Serbian Literary Herald, underlining the key idea of his work in her title. The following year, in the same journal, she discussed Pirandello's well-known drama *Henry IV*, thus revealing how familiar she was with this prose and dramatic work. Even though this contradicted previous axiological assumptions, she was more partial to Pirandello's novellas than his dramas – because they are closer to real human experiences and reality: "But these dramas, with their bizarre realities, which no one ever experiences in everyday life, but nevertheless consist of truth and logic, are not for a wider audience and many reruns. They will keep their literary and philosophical value; but the art of Pirandello will be preserved above all in his novellas."<sup>14</sup> Much of what Isidora Sekulić saw and discovered in Pirandello's works, primarily his philosophy of relativism, paradoxical anthropology and epistemological agnosticism, is reflected in her novellas in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*.

However, although the philosophy of paradoxicality and intangibility of the truth and incomprehensibility of mystical forces that control man's destiny represents the basis of Isidora Sekulić's chronicles, it is "built in" a structure which is fundamentally different from that of Pirandello. The Italian writer would use a sometimes humorous tone and tragicomic plot, enclosed within a situational story based on rich inventions of the imagination and provocative purports, to achieve unexpected twists and controversial personality clashes. Pirandello's novellas are, in fact, successful narrative structures, whose objective is to use a single situation or plot and achieve the most striking literary effect and crown it with an effective purport. In the novella *Certain Duties*, Quaquèo, a limping lamplighter, complains to Bissi, a local dignitary, about being insulted while carrying out his duty of lighting lamps and the allusions made to the infidelity of his wife. Maddened and consumed by such provocations, one day the lamplighter bursts into his home, holding a knife, with the intention of taking revenge on his wife and her lover. He quickly discovers the truth when he sees

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M. Ćurčić and others (R. Vučković, *Razvoj novije književnosti u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Sarajevo, 1991, p. 323).

<sup>13</sup> Andrić published his translation of Pirandello's novella, *Certain Duties*, the same year (1926) that Isidora Sekulić published her first text on Pirandello ("Relativitet u delu L. Pirandela") and in the same journal (SKG). In the story *On the Sunny Side*, Andrić deals with the motif of looking through a window through a female character from Pirandello's novella *The Light from the House Opposite*.

<sup>14</sup> I. Sekulić, "Problem relativiteta kod Pirandela", *Kritički radovi*, pp. 327-328.

Bissi who, in an attempt to hide, finds himself in a hopeless situation, hanging over an abyss. And instead of taking revenge, he scolds his wife for not hiding him in a more convenient place, toadies to the dignitary and tells the curious crowd outside that there is no one in the house. The paradoxical provocation in Pirandello's novellas and dramas stems from these sudden twists and revelations of truths, which are quickly masked and life continues to exist in lies, begging the question: what is truth and is there only one truth or can everyone have their own?

This is precisely the question that unravels in the novella *The Truth*. Tarará, a peasant, is on trial for the murder of his wife. The murder occurred when the wife of *cavaliere* Fiorica burst into Tarará's home and found her husband in a loving embrace with his wife. The peasant tells the court he doesn't feel guilty and that he did everything he could to prevent the mischance. By all logic, one would expect Tarará to lay blame on his wife. However, to everyone's surprise, he claims that the responsibility for what has happened rests with the *cavaliere*'s wife, who was quick to make a private matter a public issue, even though he was aware of the affair. Her denunciation had disgraced him and he was forced to take action. Had she kept silent, nothing would have happened. His honesty earned him a thirteen-year jail sentence, while he could have gone unpunished. For Tarará, the truth is something else and relative to the truth sought by the judges. Such perception of truth, its utter subjectivity and relativity, manifests itself in behaviour that is irreconcilable with normal logic and, in its own way, it is paradoxical and controversial.

The stories written by Isidora Sekulić are true chronicles: after the introduction, for the most part, the narrative flows in consecutive order; the life of one or more heroes, even several generations, is covered from birth to death. Paradoxes and surprises arise in the course of a hero's life through twists of fate and a headlong zigzag line of character development: things do not go as expected, as predispositions suggested, and they move in a completely different direction. Characters take the opposite route, which leads them to unexpected and contradictory situations – excluding everything that preceded and denying a character's entire previous biography. Still, in spite of this fundamental difference between Pirandello's novellas and the chronicles by Isidora Sekulić, the characters in their works share many of the same traits, and a common philosophy of life is suggested in different narrative structures. In the works of both writers, the characters are usually eccentrics, obsessed with an idea, or special interest, which inevitably leads them to their downfall. Life has deformed them, both mentally and physically, damaged them, and they attempt to establish their own order of things or prevail over forces which are clearly leading them to their destruction.

They are often people/caricatures with overly ingenuous faces or masks used to cover them.

But, Pirandello does not use the closed form and situational structure in all his novellas. His diverse stories also include works that are written in the form of a chronicle of an individual's life which, from the very beginning, moves downhill. *All Right!* is one such novella. This is a story about an ill-fated Latin professor, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei. He was born without crying, almost suffocated by his mother's pain, and the midwife had to spank him. His life was characterized by many diseases and a series of accidents. Stunted and unsightly ("bald, half blind with a crushed nose"), he married his patron's daughter, Satanina, who changed the direction his life was going and brought him happiness, but also sorrow when she left him to run away with another man. Professor Corvara found happiness later when he succeeded in finding a small villa in a little seaside town, where his terminally ill son would be able to rest and receive treatment. At the height of his happiness, he is hit in the head by an artillery shell, and the vacation he awaited with such hope turns into hell. The spring wind is unbearably strong and Satanina, now a broken-down woman, arrives to see her son. He throws her out the window and is arrested. Corvara always wished others well, and did good things, but he was followed by evil his whole life: "And he wondered why he, who had never intentionally done harm to anyone, should have been so targeted by fate; he, who indeed had intended to always do the right thing. Like when he removed his religious habit once his logic was no longer in accord with that of the Church, which should have been a rule of life for him; or when he married to provide for a wretched girl, who accepted his offer under the condition that he marry her, while he would have given her everything all the same, honourably and wholeheartedly. And now, after the vile betrayal and flight of that unworthy woman who had ruined his life, he will most certainly be left to once again suffer, to endure the pain of watching his son die, the only good thing, however much bitter, he had left. But why? God, no: God couldn't want this. God rewards our good deeds with good in return. He would be offended, if he believed in him. Who then governs this world, this most wretched life of man?"<sup>15</sup>

The problem of evil, whereby if you have good wishes, and desire with all your might to achieve good, you will overcome evil, completely controls the lives of the heroes in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*. Her heroes, extracted from a family line which is going downhill and crumbling, stopped at a moment of development when they had lost

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<sup>15</sup> L. Pirandello, *Trideset novela*, Zagreb, 1952, p. 49.

their normal human appearance, in an attempt to prove themselves, to use their last ounce of strength to embark on the path of a happy life or help others to do so, ultimately realize the futility of it all, and that their good wishes have turned foul and all their endeavors ended in failure. Most of them could ask themselves the same question as Pirandello's hero: why is it so; for example, Kosta Earthquake, the main character of the novella with the same title. After the usual introductory reminiscences about graves and their occupiers, the story of this protagonist begins with his birth: when he came into this world, the midwife wrote down that "she thinks it's male". The stunted child managed to overcome his caricature-like appearance and grew up to be a respected tailor with a home, shop and apprentices. The successful tailor, odd in appearance, reaches the age when men in the provincial town are regarded as confirmed bachelors. Nonetheless, it is at this time in his life that he marries a healthy peasant woman, who gives birth to three normal children. His life is complete. But soon the children grow up, depart from the path of happiness and scatter around the world in the grip of evil and misfortune. His youngest, the foolish son, stays with him and they live out the rest of their days in a provincial town, like two grotesque human shadows.

In another novella, *Mrs. Nola*, Stanojla Perčinović fails completely with her foster children. This is a character the author feels a fondness for and molds, giving a detailed description of her large stature, strong hands, and black hair tied in a bun, her hat and grey skirt. Special emphasis is placed on her enormous moral energy, which resides in an equally monumental female body, feverishly focused, like the almighty elements, on the children she gathered around her with the intention of bringing them happiness and making good people out of them. In the end, life proved her wrong and played a cruel joke on her, and her whole endeavor turned out to be in vain. Isidora Sekulić is inclined to assign the forces of evil, which are hidden from human view and act from the inside, a mystical meaning and in this way, illustrate the game of relativity and paradox man is subjected to.<sup>16</sup> Due to that futility of the humanitarian deed and the lack of results – because all things desired transform into

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<sup>16</sup> When the book *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery* appeared in the Sarajevo journal "Pregled", reviews of two leading critics were also published in the same issue: Đorđe Jovanović and Jovan Kršić. Kršić's review is very positive, which is evident by its title: "Visoka literatura Isidore Sekulić" (The High Literature of Isidora Sekulić). Jovanović is more restrained and he gives his appraisal from the point of view of a Marxist critic. He emphasizes the humanistic attitude of the author and the accumulated life and reality in the stories, and criticizes the mysticism she brought to them from essays: "Fateful mysticism is, in fact, the motive of all narratives about fate, though it's not the cause or root, because just as the source of all true narratives is reality, so does everything in the stories of Isidora Sekulić that is the true story-telling voice come from life and not mysticism". (Đ. Jovanović, "Poezija promašenosti", *Pregled*, 1940, knj. XI, sv. 202/203, p. 550).

something completely opposite – Stanojla Perčinović, called Mrs. Nola, seems like a giant caricature, in the same way that Kosta Earthquake is a tiny one.

In her endeavour to incorporate the philosophy of relativism and anthropological paradoxicality into her chronicles and point to the reasons for the downfall of an individual, family and even nation, Isidora Sekulić identified the petty spirit of provincial towns as the cause of many misfortunes. In this manner, she acknowledges the postulate of writers of genealogical novels and Taine's theory on the effect of the environment on human behaviour. In addition to Marxism, which was predominant at the time, this theory was quite topical in the thirties, so it comes as no surprise that interest in provincial settings and small or backwater towns was renewed, as was the case with prose works at the turn of the century. Leading the way were writers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with whom Isidora Sekulić was well-acquainted, especially their language, and about whom she wrote often.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, racial theories had become topical in several scientific fields, like literature and philosophy, and even in ideologies and political doctrines, which explain the traits of different nations and thus the fate of individuals within them. Race is inseparable from biological roots, to which it is easy to attribute mystical characteristics and, in this way, interpret the relativity and paradoxes in human nature. Such interpretations were not foreign to Isidora Sekulić, especially considering that her Vojvodina town is a mixture of different ethnic groups and she needed to explain the rise and fall of Serbs within it. On one occasion, in a commentary about the degeneration process of large families, she also mentions small nations: "This is often the case. Especially among poor, smaller nations and communities. Cultural awareness suddenly turns into passionate enthusiasm, and simply wears people down".<sup>18</sup>

An example of young people from a small town who were ultimately shattered by their cultural endeavours and attempts to rise above its hidebound horizontal spiritual development and become worldly, can be found in *Ambitions, Smoke*, a long tale written by Isidora Sekulić. She chose three excellent students from a provincial town and sent them into the world. One of them stumbled at the first step (he died young), and the other two were allowed to try to prove themselves at the crossroads

<sup>17</sup> This tradition of writing about small towns and ethnically mixed settings, began with Čorović, who at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century portrayed life in the backwater town of Mostar. In the period between two world wars, writers remained faithful to this tradition, but Andrić reached the greatest heights in his short stories. (R. Vučković, "Preobražaji i dostignuća proze Svetozara Čorovića", *Od Čorovića do Čopića*, Sarajevo, 1989, pp. 5-6).

<sup>18</sup> I. Sekulić, *Kronika palanačkog groblja*, p. 259.

of a provincial town and big European cities, while also examining their racial and inherited biological, cultural and ethnic distinctiveness. One of them, Pavle Čajnović, a Jew on his mother's side, was oriented towards the big world and its economic and spiritual growth by nature of his origin, but also because he was encouraged by his persistent mother, Frau Roza. Nothing could stop him, and he arrives in London via Paris, marries a Jewish girl and has a son whom he gives a Jewish first and last name, Isaac Brock. However, at the height of his fame and wealth, he is unexpectedly stricken with an incurable disease that disfigures his face, and he returns to his small town where he is cared for and buried by Ruža the Gypsy. The senselessness of his journey to success in the big world is completely exposed: "His mother is bedridden in Austria, his son is in London and his father is buried in the part of the cemetery where the unfortunate Pavle cannot be laid to rest because the Orthodox Church condemns cremation."<sup>19</sup>

Pavle's friend and schoolmate, Branko Kalenić, a pure-blooded Serb, set out on the same path of ambition and desire to make it in the world and become a famous author and historian whose main preoccupation is the topic of Judaism. But he broke down early: the speech his sickly father gave before dying, about him doing useless work while he is bleeding at home, carrying the weight of the whole family, including his ambitions, on his shoulders, was enough for him to give up on his endeavour and return home to teach in the same school where he, Pavle Čajnović and Milan Marić were once sent off with many expectations and hopes. When Pavle returns to his hometown to die and bury his ashes in the soil he never considered as his own, Branko Kalenić leaves to go to Rome, marries Marta Minardi and becomes a man of the world. He is aware, however, that the ambitions of the other schoolmates were not fulfilled. He talks about this with his former schoolteacher: "Sometimes I'm troubled by something that still pains me: how does an entire generation of students, talented, persistent and resolute people, simply go up in smoke?"<sup>20</sup> Pavle's setback and return to town and Branko's late departure, point to a paradox that brings into question all pre-established truths and allows destiny to shuffle the cards and generate surprising results. In the end, after everything, all that remains are dashed hopes, failed ambitions, and dispersed smoke.

In the chronicles of Isidora Sekulić, the philosophy of relativism and anthropological paradoxicality are inseparable from the problem of culture and nationality, from the issue of the relationship between nationality and internationality, the provincial town and the world. The

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 247.

multi-ethnic communities of Vojvodina's towns provide her with plenty of material and an opportunity to confront different views based on real individuals and their attitude towards others. Of course, she was most interested in the position of the Serbs and their dilemmas at the beginning of the twentieth century, which could be summed up in the question: what to choose – one's native soil, provincial town and a quiet life, respecting the strict patriarchal norms and family rules, or go into the world, live in a large world city, accept all the challenges of cosmopolitanism and European liberalism, and lose one's awareness of national and religious identity. This dilemma is also found in the novella, *Moloch*, written by Veljko Petrović, in which the main character, at the request of his family, abandons his plans and the world fame he gained with his bold bridge structure over Isar River in Germany, and returns to a provincial town to spend the rest of his life serving his home and heritage. Branko Kalenić returns home for similar reasons, after being criticized by his sickly father. But, Isidora Sekulić did not allow her protagonist to maintain his decision, thus relativizing all truths and choices. Her hero traded roles with his friend Pavle Čajnović and, in doing so, proved that life is full of unpredictable surprises and susceptible to constant paradoxical oscillations. This is also the philosophy of the narrator in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, and its transparency and irreducibility to rigid formulas is proof that it was generated in direct connection with the relativism of modern culture in the twentieth century, leaving behind the positivistic normativism of the previous century, despite the fact that it is expressed in the form of a chronicle – in its natural form of narration.

When she searches for the reasons behind the failure of Serbian intellectuals in their endeavours in Europe and the world, Isidora Sekulić finds them in their character traits, including racial and national distinctiveness. They have a lack of firmness of character; they do not possess the faith and thirst for life that is inherent in Jews, or their ability “to grab life by the horns, to live life with the originative thirst of their race.”<sup>21</sup> Pavle Čajnović’s misfortune lies primarily in the fact that, in addition to Roza’s persistence, he also inherited the despondency of Jova Čajnović, a retired sergeant and handsome and jovial Serb from Lika. Hence the duality and contrast in his character, and his occasional downheartedness on the road to realizing his ambitions.

In her novella, *Mrs. Nola*, Isidora Sekulić brings together two of her heroine’s foster children: Srba the verger and the town *schleifer*’s son Hans, that is Luka, as she called him – a Serb and a German. In so doing, she points out the emotional and moral lability of the former and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

the persistence and probity of the latter. Mrs. Nola favours Srba the verger, but she does not deny love to either: “She loved little Luka as if he were a child, as something that caresses her. She loved Srba as if he were an old man, as something brittle and proud, something Serbian, something that will take a lot of effort and hard work, but in the end, bring joy not only to her dream of being a foster mother, but also the strange, restless aspirations, a flame that had been burning with fluctuating intensity over the years, but remained with her always, until the day she died.”<sup>22</sup> In the end, Srba betrays all her hopes, and Luka runs to her aid when he is needed the most. The heroine of this novella, expresses her ambivalence towards Srba the Serb and Hans the German with a paradox: “It bothered me that he was not a Serb, and it hurt me that the one who was a Serb was no good.”<sup>23</sup>

By means of an image of the Tisza River in the novella, *Ambitions, Smoke*, which she attributed to the inspiration of Branko Kalenić, during a school assignment, Isidora Sekulić gives a convincing illustration of the theory about the difficulties of Serbian provincial intelligentsia to remain independent in relation to prevailing European developments. Kalenić says: “I empathize with the Tisza for being a mountain river which then leaves the mountains. It joins the Danube near the village of Slankamen, and that’s the end. The Danube swallows it up just like that. The Tisza that begins in the forests below the Carpathians, right below a mountain called Chorna Hora. Afterwards, the Tisza is neither clear nor fast.”<sup>24</sup> A Serbian intellectual does not possess the strength to preserve his briskness and fervour upon entering the mighty river of European culture.

Still, in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, Isidora Sekulić does not just analyze the fate of the Serbian intelligentsia, who hold the character traits of their people. She places the whole mosaic spiritual being of a provincial Vojvodina town under her analytical magnifying glass. In addition to the Serbs within this setting, she was most interested in the Jews, which is to be expected at the end of the thirties, and which coincides with the arrival of Jewish writers and themes in the literature of Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup> This is when the Jews became an issue in regard to the conscience and fate of Europe. With respect to the novella *Ambitions, Smoke*, it was even said that its main topic is “the problem of Judaism and its tragedy of fate”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> R. Vučković, “Samokovlja i Andrić”, *Od Čorovića do Ćopića*, p. 132-193.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kršić, “Visoka literatura Isidore Sekulić”, *Meduratni kritičari*, Novi Sad/Beograd, 1983, p. 85.

The author's perception of the Jews is ambivalent and expresses features of the paradoxical philosophy found in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, however images of the positive qualities of people without a country or language are more pronounced than their developed ability to feel a sense of home wherever they find themselves and, at the same time, demonstrate incredible energy: "A remarkable race. The only race with energy in its purest form; as in the creation of the world".<sup>27</sup> She allowed Branko Kalenić to select the issue of Jews and Judaism as the theme of his doctoral thesis, and his best friend Pavle Čajnović was his living example.

Isidora Sekulić also writes about other groups of nations in the conglomerate of a Vojvodina provincial town, which was also an integral part of Central European spiritual life. In doing so, she observes different nations similarly to the way she observes the fate of big families in the process of disintegration and deformation. In her unfinished novella, *A Provincial Town and its Last Greeks*, published in the second expanded edition of *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery* after the war, Isidora Sekulić analyzes the historical fate of a Greek ethnic group in a provincial Vojvodina town.<sup>28</sup> She says that the Greeks were divided into those who were pure-blooded and those who were not; those who preserved the purity of the Greek nation with the persistence and fanaticism of those who are small, and those who mixed with others, mostly Serbs, by way of marriage and thereby lost their "purity". This story about the last remnants and scraps of pure Greeks demonstrates the extent to which family history narratives in the prose works of I. Sekulić coincide with stories about racial and moral, even physical, degeneration of a small ethnic community that lives outside its majority, whereby individuals transform into bizarre eccentrics and phantom fossils, and a realistic story into a grotesque. Pirandello's grotesque writing style and technique characterized by paradoxical oscillations is also a distinguishing trait of these types of chronicles by I. Sekulić. On one occasion, the author says that "contrary to the Jews, who feel completely at home and live normal lives, pure-blooded Greeks live bizarre, strange

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<sup>27</sup> I. Sekulić, *Kronika palanačkog groblja*, p. 222.

<sup>28</sup> With respect to the novella *A Provincial Town and its Last Greeks*, Stevan Radovanović provided documented proof that Zemun was the town that I. Sekulić was talking about in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*. She had spent her childhood in this town, so it is quite possible that this is the setting of her novellas. However, we still cannot say with complete certainty that I. Sekulić only wrote about Zemun; her provincial town encompasses life in other small towns in Vojvodina as well, and has universal meaning, similar to many other writers, even those that came later (for example, Faulkner). The image of Zemun from her childhood could have only served as inspiration, as concluded by Radovanović: "Isidora Sekulić has preserved many memories from her childhood in a provincial town." (S. Radovanović: *Lokalni izvori u jednoj pripovetci 'Kronike palanačkog groblja'*, *Književnost i jezik*, 1974, knj. XXI, br. 3, p. 47).

and eccentric lives".<sup>29</sup> These eccentrics were the first medium she could use to examine oscillations in human nature and behavioural differences among generations and isolated individuals, who are the central focus of the chronicler.

The similitude between Pirandello's prose model and that of Isidora Sekulić in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery* is that both give priority to life facts over established truths and confirmed fiction. After all, Pirandello was the one to introduce the so-called paradoxical drama, rejecting the drawing-room drama and the entertaining play based on intrigue, with a simplified plot and a one-dimensional Euclidean perception of man. He advocated the idea that art is life, and not cogitation, that character development should resemble reality not invention. He would, therefore, start with the main premises of a naturalistic drama and then change them in accordance with his new ideas. The naturalistic origin of Pirandello's drama poetics can also be found in his novellas. He often mocks characters who have lost touch with reality and completely surrendered to fantasy. In his story *World of Paper*, the old man turns into paper due to his excessive reading, and the professor in the novella *Patarene Heresy*, is so angry with the German scientist who belittled his research that he immerses himself so much into his work that he does not even notice that he is giving a lecture to umbrellas and not his students. Pirandello focuses on one detail and one individual and strives to simplify his storytelling and follow the logic of the story itself, avoiding bolder structures. Novellas like his *Tragedies of One Person* are rarer. A character from a story written by another author joins a session with his characters, whom he has a habit of talking to every Sunday morning, and complains about his creator, asking that he modify him and make him true to life.

However, such structures are characteristic of Pirandello's dramas, especially the two most famous: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*. Written at the beginning of the twentieth century as a reaction against the paper fictionalism of Symbolists and Expressionists and the "one truth" philosophy, these dramas are consistent with the way art had turned away from fiction towards reality, known in German literature as the New Objectivity movement which was also dominant in the thirties. Both dramas begin with fiction, with literary construction (first) or feigned madness (second), which face reality and unveil and demystify the very act of creating, that is to say, making a work of art. This endeavour requires bold structural interventions which, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, are based on the "theatre within the theatre" concept.

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<sup>29</sup> I. Sekulić, *Kronika palanačkog groblja*, p. 369.

In *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, Isidora Sekulić also begins with the naturalistic concept of chronicles and genealogical novels. However, neither she nor Pirandello stick to the framework of this concept, but rather surpass it through relativistic philosophy, paradoxical anthropology and, to some extent, the use of the constructivist approach to storytelling. The starting point in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery* is that which had already been lived and then returned to the stage of life in all its brutality. This could be done if some already existing documents are brought back to life, which the chronicler, bogus researcher, will resurrect, and summon times past in a provincial town. The construction of the prose is adapted to the theme of the chronicle and differs from that of Pirandello. The story begins with a document, inscriptions on graves in a provincial cemetery, and follows the logic of an exposition given by a local chronicler who knows or is doing research on the history of certain families. This type of construction, as an accepted narrative model, is repeated from novella to novella. The chronicle *Kosta Earthquake* begins with the words: "In the cemetery, under a large branch of a well-known walnut tree, one can still see traces of the grave of Kosta Earthquake. The grave is squalid, and it has always been trampled on by children when the walnuts are ready to be picked".<sup>30</sup> The unfortunate family history of the hero follows.

We, therefore, have a montage of a document of cemetery culture and a family history narrative. The document is not conveyed, as the Dadaists once did, in its original form, but rather as the author's stylized transcript. The narrator reads the grave inscriptions and interprets family histories and the bizarre and strange twists in the lives of their just as strange members. The chronicler is in the background of the story and does not impose himself on the reader. He appears as a character only once (in the short story *Children*), and listens to a gravedigger's story about four children who were struck by an unusual tragedy (three girls drowned, and the fourth, a boy, took part in the rape of a homeless woman). After the gravedigger expresses his appreciation and claims to be telling the truth ("Graveyards don't lie, and neither do gravediggers"): "The chronicler is alone. Silence. Blossoms silently descend from the branches and plum trees... Children without a childhood grow to become unhappy people, or die... Plum blossoms pile up on the graves".<sup>31</sup> The structural approach in the chronicles of Isidora Sekulić is not radical or comprehensive, but it is of essential importance for the narrative tone. It helps to form a unique quasi-chronicle narrative and thus change the nature of the chronicle and create a modern saga about inevitable transience and the disappearance of individuals and groups of people.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 326.

This is how, in *A Chronicle of a Provincial Cemetery*, Isidora Sekulić, successfully and in her own unique way, combined the narrative techniques of the documentary method, montage and chronicles – in order to describe the degenerative process of families and thereby be consistent with the tradition of naturalistic genealogical prose while, in part, changing it with the philosophy of relativism and paradoxicality. With these methods and philosophical ideas, characteristic of European literature of the thirties, Isidora Sekulić managed to overcome the aggressiveness of the naturalistic concept even when she reflected on the current topic of anthropogeography and racial characteristics of individuals and nations. As a subtle author, familiar with human nature, she was primarily interested in the individual, his spiritual and biological drama, and paradoxical manifestations of his complex and incomprehensible being, irreducible to general truths. The colorful setting of a Vojvodina provincial town provided the author with enough material to illustrate her discoveries about man through numerous examples, but she was not always able to incorporate philosophical theories into the fabric of the story, which came easy to Pirandello who could have served as an example with his theorizing in narratives. But, regardless of this noticeable weakness in her stories, one cannot deny their modernity, which only makes them a new variation of the ideas and endeavors from *Travel Companions*. One must also keep in mind that Isidora Sekulić wrote her chronicle narratives prior to the chronicle novels of Ivo Andrić, and both are incorporated into the same European literary context, which is overarched by the epic tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers* and could be described as a chronicle elevated to a myth. And this work by Mann is also the creation of modern European literature, which was preceded by the naturalistic novel *Buddenbrooks*.

Translated from Serbian by  
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MIHAJLO PANTIĆ

## DISINTEGRATION OF REALISM AND THE GENRE INTERMEDIATENESS IN VELJKO PETROVIĆ'S "BUNJA"

"Bunja" – that early, probably the most famous (though not the best) story by Veljko Petrović, first published in 1909 – is illustrative, maybe just because it is not an extreme example of certain more general, transformative processes observed in the early twentieth century Serbian prose.<sup>1</sup> In "Bunja", namely, apart from Petrović's individual entirely creative characteristics, it is possible to notice two general features of prose of the age of modernist literature which will be explained in more detail in this text, with emphasis on the author's specificities. It is about the *announcement of the disintegration of realistic poetics* ("turning inward" – as Leon Edel would put it) and a kind of *genre intermediary* – a textual and poetic fluctuation between novelistic and

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<sup>1</sup> In one of the more recent readings of the Serbian prose from the beginning of the twentieth century, Slobodanka Peković, analysing the works of Veljko Miličević, Isidora Sekulić, Milutin Uskoković, Veljko Petrović and other writers, noted, among other things: "At the beginning of the twentieth century, changes in the cultural and social structure of Serbian society also allowed a change in narrative genres. Modern creators have gradually changed the role of the writer himself. The author was no longer just one who mechanically records and imitates the objective world and real-life events. The need for glorification and idealisation of rural and co-operative life disappeared, the obligation to imitate the collective principle as a law of survival was lost. The individual sphere, with the immeasurable depths of the human soul, has been a major field of interest for the writers. Investigation of internal states also required a kind of self-observation, the unprecedented discovery of one's own personality and the analysis of those elusive daydreaming states, being half-asleep, doubling, or separation the public from hidden personalities. The analysis of separate, small worlds abolished the analytical, logical and chronological description of events and enabled a new technique in prose, the stream of consciousness, of discontinuity and disintegration of reality." (Slobodanka Peković, *Serbian Prose at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, Prosveta, Belgrade, 1987, p. 12.)

narrative conventions, which, once again, confirms the thesis that genre shifts always occur at the turn of the epoch, when worn or petrified poetics is replaced by poetics in progress, a poetics that itself oscillates between convention and innovation, between the negation of the old and the affirmation of new artistic construction.

In our criticism, the belief that Veljko Petrović is “a realistic writer in whose work one feels the pulse of modern times, through whose narration penetrates restlessness and anxiety as a new quality of consciousness, as an internal mark for distraction and dissociation, for lost psychic stability, has rightly settled. His heroes, however, are most often firmly, ineradicably tied to the ground, to the environment from which they sprouted like a plant from the earth, and just a few of them carry a romantic experience of disappointment, some muffled and dark curse of life’s failure or the unbearable pressure and experience of loneliness as a cosmic burden and bottomless oblivion.”<sup>2</sup> The loss of elementary existential values Petrović’s heroes are faced with, including Stipe Paštrović, the main character of “Bunja”, brings a well-known outcome – the collision of the alienated life and the archetypal impulses that would like to come to the surface cause a tragic discrepancy. Veljko Petrović often forms his stories exactly by describing this discrepancy, the next mechanism of a formal and significant upheaval, when the hidden disparity is visible in its full form and is usually fatal. (On this upheaval, therefore, lies both the fabulative and the content-related set of narration.)

Let us recall “Bunja.” In this story, Petrović, bearing in mind the social and political crisis of Austria-Hungary at the turn of the century, depicts the meaninglessness, hypocrisy and dissipation of a falsely regulated petty-bourgeois life, idealising nature and human compliance with it. Through the destiny of Ravangrad lawyer Stipa Paštrović, the narrator gives a critical intersection of philistinism, artificial family harmony and well-being, and the concealed overall moral decay of the stale provincial ambience, in which the main character, always in the discrepancy between the desirable and the real, never finds himself. “Bunja” has its culmination in Paštrović’s pathetic but suggestively shaped monologue, at a ball in his house, when the disappointment and resignation that has been accumulated over the years simply nothing can stop. The epilogue is madness and death.

The poetic basis of “Bunja” is largely realistic. The writer takes a realistic approach to character formation, carefully spinning the web of social motivation, the description is more flat than analytical (though,

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<sup>2</sup> Zoran Gluščević, “The Scents and Fruits of the Earth”, preface to the book by Veljko Petrović *Ravangrad*, Nolit, Belgrade, 1966, p. 12.

sometimes, with analytical strides and traces of the grotesque), tending to use direct speech or, rather, to find typing characteristics and quote socially typical words, locating events in a temporally and spatially recognisable environment (though renamed a global symbol; Ravangrad becomes a kind of mythical place, which is a certain move from realism), with special, critical attention analyses of the transformation of social strata and the disintegration of ethical values which simultaneously tracks and marks these layers. “Bunja” is characterised by a preserved and developed plot, a separate epilogue, a realistic system of individualisation and characterisation of the characters, and so on, but on the plane of motivation, there are considerable and significant changes that testify to the *disintegration of realism*. Along with the well-preserved traditional motivational network (where the character acts in congruence with his social, “objective” context), the narrator builds a flow based on hidden, irrational, archetypal, deeply psychological impulses. In “Bunja”, Petrović expands the thematic and content-related plane of realistic storytelling, emphasising some, for realistic prose atypical semantic elements, which, to tell the truth, exist in that prose, but in an underdeveloped, non-dominant way. In the storytelling technique, Petrović will occasionally use inversions (although the structure of the story, with the amplification and retardations, it is still linear), but what is the most important for moving away from the realistic storytelling matrix is a more free and expressive (sometimes too artificial) use of linguistic material. We can notice that very often in “Bunja”, the linguistic “literalism” of the realist writer is mitigated, which at the same time opens the possibility for the construction of a new, more modern prose expression.<sup>3</sup>

What makes “Bunja” particularly interesting, however, is its very form. The key to its critical reading (the key of the form and the key of the meaning) is found in the subtitle, “the story of a rootless man.” That indication brings us back to the beginning – it talks about a genre intermediary, the trace of touch and interweaving of both different formal characteristics (narratives and novels) and different stylistic formations.

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<sup>3</sup> Let us substantiate this thesis by quoting a narrative paragraph from “Bunja”: “Dr Paštrović, going beyond his regular path, entered, as far as his feet carried him, to the Golden Beam, into the quietest street of the inner city, where blinds and windows close just after eight and where it seems to you that no one lives there behind the curtains, but downstairs, in the windowless stables, pale spinsters, blind doctors and retired freaks move, who kiss roses and feed pigeons from their palms; those front rooms all smell of old furniture, which is always covered with white linen, and of pine resin.” And without much analysis, there is a clear similarity between Petrović’s use of language and some contemporary types of expression. This paragraph seems to belong to a Pavić, not Petrović text! (Cited by Veljko Petrović, *Ravangrad*, Nolit, Belgrade, 1966, p. 95.)

(The stylistic formation of realism is characterised by a clear genre nomenclature, as well as a genre hierarchy – the penetration of a different poetics and different aesthetics immediately causes the destabilisation of both nomenclature and hierarchy.) “Bunja” also encourages us, by its nature, (as well historically as theoretically) to aporetic rethinking the genre and typological characteristics of artistic prose, that is, the story-telling itself.

The aforementioned aporeticism is most easily noticed when analysing those prose works which, just like “Bunja”, would somehow “exceed” themselves from the inside. (There are often cases when, thinking that we are already in the field of novel, we still stand in the narrative or vice versa.)<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is true unless we define the prose type/genre solely by quantitative criteria. In a series: *simple forms – novelette – novella – novel* the difference in scope is so obvious that there is no need to declare it the most important. (What, then, with transitional forms: *a short-short story, a novelette, novella or novel?*) In the analytical description of prose types: “Generally, distinguishing between two forms must involve noticing how each type processes the subject, and this is especially true of artistic prose types.” This is how one interpreter of this field observes it.<sup>5</sup> The fact that it is not possible to define precisely where the point of difference starts, that is, leaving the particular prose genre (from the nomenclature of the epic genus) – that transient line, over which the genre begins or ceases to function according to the laws of a paradigm, that exists exclusively in the sphere of theoretical abstraction – does not mean that nominally, draft systematisations are not possible. On the contrary.

Bearing this in mind, in the function of a practical case, a concise attitude, Veljko Petrović’s approach to “Bunja” becomes more complex. “Bunja” constantly oscillates between the narrative and the novel, hence the subtitle “novella.” With that name, in realism, the genre that determines the work that (for both qualitative and quantitative reasons) it is no longer a novella but is not a novel yet. Using chess terminology, in a typical realistic “story” the novella and the novel are in the draw posi-

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<sup>4</sup> “In my opinion, the difference (between a novel, a novella or a story) is that epic stylistic means are more sparingly applied in a novella than in a novel that has the potential for wider exposure, as well as the development of all its basic epic forms. *Borderline cases* (emphasis by M. P.) can be found in large numbers, especially in the past decades. In these cases, the original, extensive novelistic form is declining and shows a tendency to shorten”, notes Rafael Koskimies in the text *The Definition of the Novella* (Dometi, Rijeka, XIV, 11, 1981, p. 24). No matter whether we regard “Bunja” as a “reduced novel” or an “extended narrative,” Koskimies’ attitude from 1937 is also applicable in this case.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Leibowitz, “The Novel as a Narrative Form,” *Dometi*, Rijeka, XIV, 11, 1981, p. 41.

tion. However, the story “Bunja”, no matter how much it owes to the horizon of realistic poetics, reveals some other, if not articulate enough, artistic aspirations. The relationship between novella and novel, using chess terminology again, is not now in the draw position, but in the stalemate position. The tensions and playbacks of various genre characteristics in the text of this Petrović’s piece are of such a nature that “Bunja” can be referred to as a “draft” for a novel which, for quite specific reasons, did not fully become that. Let’s see how and why.

There are several types of novelistic hints in “Bunja”. While most of Veljko Petrović’s other stories could be defined as a narrative focused on one situation, and his short stories as successive temporal and spatial sections without digressions, in “Bunja”, the amplification and retardation classification of the details, stratifying the still existing linear plot with inverse and retrospective narrative procedures can be noticed. Besides, the plot in “Bunja” is not quite typical for the story. It is a little bit more diverted and quite explicitly moving in multiple directions. It begins with a broad, long, descriptive introduction – almost a novelistic exposition – and the main character is gradually introduced into the scene, which is the reverse of the procedure of Petrović’s other stories and narratives, in which the narration begins *in medias res*.

The fact that the narrator pays equal attention to both the protagonist and the supporting characters is of particular importance. Without neglecting the integrative plane of storytelling, Petrović constructed “Bunja” so that it not only implies but also emphasises the autonomy of certain episodes, even to the extent that, as in the case of Stevan Prekajski, the reader perceives it as the embryo of a “story within a story”. When the narrator introduces and incorporates a character into the narrative flow, the characterisation of that character is quickly and concisely implemented. The narrator never fails to introduce us to the “prehistory” of the side characters and thus, in fact, forms the episodes. Those episodes in which the supporting characters are temporary main characters have enough internal charge to be seen as equivalents to the underdeveloped chapters of the novel. The character descriptions grow into extensive digressions, with a strongly expressed, objectified narrator’s distance. The character speaks his language and reaches his voice – and that announcement of polyphony, even in faint traces, marks the entry into the novelistic field.

Although focused upon the psychological transformation of the main character Stipe Paštrović, “Bunja” continually engenders multi-thematic circles (political map of Austria-Hungary, Hungarianization, bourgeoisie, clerical class, family and city life from the end of the previous and the beginning of this century, archetypal attachment to the country, and so on). All these thematic circles are not just mere scenery of the main event, but because of their scope and potential importance,

they form a novelistic background – through continuous, flowing narrative progression (the accumulation of new details and characters), the expanding of the story horizon is looming into the “novel horizon”.

Although largely realistically conventional, Petrović’s descriptions occasionally take on a new, skewed angle, and as if following certain form of painting, it is the path to the psychological profile of the individual characters. The dimness of the inner worlds that the Serbian writers in the early twentieth century used to resort to (and not just them: it is an almost the international phenomenon) and in “Bunja” it contributes to the intensity of the culmination. All this time the main character behaves consistently opposite of what he thinks until the last scene (the culminating point) in which that traumatic incongruity reaches the climax and the conflict within the character is tragically resolved.

The social motivation system in “Bunja” is so diverted that it clearly goes beyond the boundaries of the story as a prose genre. Rural/pagan – urban/phistine oppositions are constantly emphasised. If we join to this intersection of different worlds (each of which is going through the crisis of its own, and whose encounter gives way only to a misunderstanding), a whole series of side-thematic details (economic decay, hypocrisy, misery, a national issue, the accident of fate), it is easy to realise that this material to another writer, educated on realistic models (such as, in the case of Veljko Petrović, Jakov Ignjatović and Stevan Sremac, in whose works the author of “Bunja” saw himself his poetic starting point) would be sufficient enough to write a novel based on it. Let us recall that how realistic writers construct their novels is preserved in “Bunja” *in nuce* – all that is presented does not necessarily have to be, but indirectly is the preparation for the culminating point, for a tragic epilogue. It seems as if Veljko Petrović did not want to go again along the path he had crossed long ago, but retaining the memory of it (and awareness of it), he summarised, extended and added to it some new tones, essential for the further evolutionary changes of the Serbian art of storytelling. In that sense, “Bunja” is a discrete, poetically non-radical anticipation of new, modernistic phases of the narrative process in the Serbian language in the twentieth century.

Let’s return to the basic question. If in “Bunja”, from one plane of observation, one can recognise a hint of a possible “exit to the novel”, why did the realisation of that novel not really happen? Where did the occurrence of “intentional suppression”, “closure” into the narrative, subtitle “story”? The dilemmas, at least partially, can be resolved by extending the analysis to the context of Petrović’s work and to the conventions of the age in which the writer creates and which, in proportion to his talent and abilities, indirectly forms. Veljko Petrović is,

by vocation, primarily a storyteller, and “Bunja” is, among other things, the result of a fluctuation between realism and modernism (at the same time genre and poetic fluctuation), that is, between realistic storytelling and modern prose procedures. According to the peculiarities of the structure and the complexity of the fields of meaning, “Bunja”, if the critical analysis is allowed to sense and “rewrite” in such a way, would be a more or less conventional realistic novel, a belated conventional realistic novel. Hence the narrator’s suppression. (By doing so, summarising, this may at first seem like the unnecessary cuts and narrative gaps become more understandable.) Apprehending the demands of modern times, being himself its self-conscious representative (as evidenced by the article on Modernism in 1910), Petrović muffled though not always completely, the need for a superfluous, anachronistic attachment to his literary ancestors, speaking temperately in the language and procedure of the coming age, and chose the latter between the conventional realistic novel and the reshaped realistic narrative.

Translated from Serbian by  
*Ljubica JANKOV*

ZORAN PAUNOVIĆ

## MILOŠ CRNJANSKI AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

At first glance, profoundly subjective and devoid of any criterion, except for the author's individual preference for certain writers, Miloš Crnjanski's approach to English literature is, in fact, based primarily on his extremely broad knowledge of its history, main directions of development, and most prominent protagonists. In the essays dedicated to individual authors and their works, this is demonstrated more or less in passing, as something that goes without saying – especially in the texts written after the author had spent a quarter of a century in England. In these texts, Crnjanski experiences the assimilated British culture as his own, as something that belongs to him and to which he belongs. This change is quite commonplace among immigrant authors. For example, Vladimir Nabokov, despite being bilingual and open in a manner characteristic of involuntary cosmopolitans, spent over ten years in America, struggling to experience and perceive this world as his own, without success: when this finally did happen, he wrote *Lolita*, a novel which was (according to his own words) not only “the product of his love affair with the English language”,<sup>1</sup> but also represented harsh criticism of the shallow and aesthetically exceedingly problematic American pop culture; a novel which could only have been written by a foreigner who had ceased to be one – someone who knows his new home is not his home, and that the other, the real home, will never be his again. For Miloš Crnjanski, *A Novel of London* represented his “graduate thesis” from homelessness. Nikolai Ryepnin is not English, but he is not Russian either – and at the same time, he is both one and the other: this is

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in: David Albahari, “Vladimir Nabokov” (Afterword to the novel *Lolita*), BIGZ, Beograd 1988, p. 324.

why he recognizes much of what constitutes daily English life that only the English can know, while also being bewildered and confused by it all, as only a Russian who just stepped off a train can be. This dual perspective is also characteristic of Crnjanski's later essays, which we will come back to later. In his early essays, he talks about English literature as something vastly distant in time and space, even when he feels spiritual closeness with the work in question.

This is apparent in his essays on Oscar Wilde (whose last name he transliterates as */Uajld/*), William Blake (i.e., */Vilijem Blek/*) and William Shakespeare. Crnjanski writes about Wilde almost as his contemporary, only twenty years after the death of the unfortunate and misunderstood Irish genius – in other words, at a time when his works had not yet been assessed or evaluated properly, either in England or the rest of Europe. England despised him because of his private life and thus unfairly disparaged his works; Europe (especially Germany, Italy and France) was prone to overestimation, partly due to his fascinating character and, presumably, partly to spite the English. Hence, the ability of our poet, who was among the first to write about Wilde in our country, to examine his works precisely and comprehensively, providing very clear assessments and views, has an even greater impact. In truth, he too, like most interpreters of Wilde's works from the beginning to the present, starts with his biography, searching for the key, or at least clues to understanding his works. And he demonstrates, even then, that his knowledge of the English greatly exceeds the usual stereotypes. Wilde's overnight rise to fame in London, and his even swifter downfall, Crnjanski views as a "tragicomedy", and says that the reason for his (Wilde's) "undoing was the fact that he had lost sight of the fact that he was in England... since England, a land of traders, cannot tolerate a poor man who behaves like a lord".<sup>2</sup> He was indeed among the first to recognize, and quite lucidly, one of the main absurdities that marked the life of Oscar Wilde: he strived to motivate originality in others, but he motivated imitation; instead of creative followers, he was followed by "parrots, cheerless chimpanzees". From the standpoint of art, this was, in effect, the basis of his tragedy. With regard to his life, this tragedy is tied primarily to his uncompromising lifestyle. The truly heroic consistency with which Wilde lived his life, Crnjanski also recognizes in his work, so not only does he examine the work as a whole, but he also sees that it is inextricably linked to the author's life (there are very few authors for whom this biographical approach is as justified as in the case

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<sup>2</sup> Miloš Crnjanski, *Eseji i prikazi*, Književna zajednica Novog Sada, Novi Sad 1991, p. 293. Hereinafter citations from this edition are indicated by a page number in brackets, following the citation.

of Oscar Wilde). And so he says (as someone who also often battled against false morals): “No one had ever upturned morals and rules, and peeled off fake masks with such irony and spirit.” (296) This is why he concludes that Wilde had reached the height of his skills first of all in his essays, and then – somewhat unexpectedly – in his fairy tales, only to realize at some point further on that the text he is writing is actually a foreword to the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, about which, on the other hand, he has few words of praise. This is the reason why he deals with it last: the work that gained “pitiful glory”, sentimental, “journalistically colourful and superficial” (298-299). Nevertheless, it should be read because, in spite of everything, in the end “the soul somehow trembles, filled with the mysterious beauty of this book.” (299) And he concludes, pinpointing the very essence of the quality of Wilde’s skill: “Once Wilde, the ironic psychologist and frivolous moralist, is long forgotten, only then will the glory of Wilde, the aesthete, become widely known.” (299) Was he right? Yes and no. The former was not forgotten, but the latter has become more famous.

With regard to William Blake, Crnjanski says that, next to Shelley, he is the most elusive and divine of all the English lyricists. He is especially fascinated by the image of the final moments of Blake’s life, in which the dying poet raves and sings, and says: “they are not mine, those poems are not mine”. This fascination with the details in the life of the author will continue to guide his choice of reading, and in no small measure govern his view of the same. Crnjanski usually observes poetic works in the context of the influence of three factors: sociohistorical circumstances, the general spiritual climate, as well as the life and character of the poet. This is evident, more or less, in each of his essays on English poets. As a result, in addition to the overt subjectivity in his approach, he represents himself not only as a contemporary, but also as an interpreter of literature who is ahead of his time, and writes studies, short in length but broad in content, consisting of intertwined approaches and methodologies, always conjoined and concerted with the personal stamp of the critic, whose instincts perhaps serve him even better than knowledge (which is exceptional) and insight (which is impressive), thus creating truly small cultural studies completely in the spirit of the most up-to-date science of literature, which has – for some time now – ceased to be “pure” science on “pure” literature.

Such a critic will, even in the very short text on Blake, single out dichotomy as the most significant stamp of his artistic personality: Blake is “elusive and divine, ascetic and sensual, a pragmatic revolutionary and dreamer, insecure, like a sleepwalker”. (264) Even in later texts, such a critic will, from time to time and in the least expected places, be able to touch upon the essential, slip into a sentence or in brackets

a point that attests to a depth of insight unmatched even in critical studies within his own country. Each of his texts on English literature offers proof of this assertion.

In 1930, Crnjanski writes his first and only real text on Shakespeare (if we omit theatre reviews), dedicated, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, to the *Sonnets*. Unexpectedly, because Crnjanski admired Shakespeare, first and foremost, as a great (perhaps even the greatest) playwright, whose plays were his strong suit even as a poet – that is to say, the power of whose plays stems precisely from the brilliance and strength of his poetic expression. However, Crnjanski (like Jan Kott a few decades later) finds drama in the *Sonnets*.

He does so primarily because he approaches them with such a desire, claiming that “they excite the imagination, intellect and the craving of the spirit for the unusual” (161) before knowing even a single verse: It is as though Crnjanski expects that Shakespeare, free from (or without the support of) theatre masks and various roles, will step out before the readers of the *Sonnets* “as his true self, bare and frightful in all the demonic beauty of voluptuaries and fierce lovers, in a single role, more harrowing and distressing than the roles of Romeo, Claudius, Hamlet?” (161) In each of his essays on literature – which is evident in this fragment as well – Crnjanski is first of all a writer, and not a critic or historian: as a rule, he is not interested in the science of literature, but in literature. This is why, even when he writes about others, he “tells stories”: with regard to Shakespeare, this storytelling begins with the issue of authorship, followed by the story “told” in the *Sonnets*.

With the desire, however, to slightly tone down and bring under control the unbridled impressionism of his creative and critical approach to interpreting the works of others, he begins by informing the reader about a contemporary study he has read on Shakespeare’s work (Mr. Lefranc, from the Collège de France), as well as defining his own approach as “internal”, based exclusively on the work itself and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. Still, like many of his predecessors, Crnjanski begins with facts from Shakespeare’s life (only to quickly abandon them) in order to set up some sort of firm basis. In the case of Shakespeare, abandoning these facts was made much easier due to the fact that they were limited: scarce and not all logically arranged, like a detective novel, instead of generating reliable conclusions, these facts most often leave room for the imagination.

First of all, the identity of the mysterious *W. H.*, to whom the *Sonnets* are dedicated, holds no significance for most critics. However, for Crnjanski, being both a poet and a critic, it does: mainly because the identity and role of the mysterious addressee, in his opinion, could help provide a fuller understanding of everything that is both said and

withheld in the sonnets. For this reason, he poses the questions: “Is this title a mystification? Are these initials arbitrary? Was it this famous W. H. actually the one who enabled the publishing of these intimate sonnets? Even with the censor?” And he adds: “For this simple review of ours, all of this is of little interest to us.” (163)

But, we are still interested, very much so. This is the reason why Crnjanski engages in speculation, or more to the fact, points out several characteristic assumptions as to the identity of the “young man” which, through logic known only to him, brings him to one of the truly important questions: the question of the order of the poems in the collection. Maintaining his safe status of a non-expert, he polemicizes in “layman’s terms” with the experts, while at the same time showing a clearly authoritative attitude. Aware of the abundance of literature on Shakespeare, Crnjanski knows that it would be unrealistic to expect that any sort of new topic could be introduced, but he does not abandon the idea of using a new approach to study the already familiar topics, in other words, to incorporate them, through an altered hierarchy of meanings, into a new analytic and synthetic whole, which would shed new light on the analyzed works. The fundamental characteristic of Crnjanski’s approach to Shakespeare is his awareness of the significance of the whole, that is, of observing the *Sonnets* as a carefully constructed work, with a solid dramaturgical foundation, characters, and “story”.

Moreover, Crnjanski has also proven to be a good translator, which gives additional value to his analysis of the *Sonnets*. For example, the verse at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> sonnet:

*Music to bear, why bears’t thou the music sadly?*

he translates as: *music is within you, why then does the playing sadden you?* (166). There are many such successful examples in the text (and, truth be told, some less successful: *Shall I compare you to a summer’s day?* is translated as “Shall I compare you with a summer’s day?” (167)). Crnjanski will be most accurate, when it comes to the meaning and scope of the art of translation, in the essay on Christopher Marlowe, where he concludes: “The archaic one-syllable words, in use in Marlowe’s period, as well as his declamatory, baroque diction, are indeed lost in every translation – the original sounds ghastly.” (203) (The translation also sounds ghastly, only in a different way.)

It is quite natural (perhaps even expected, but definitely unintentional) that Crnjanski was most attracted by those images and motifs in the works of Shakespeare and other poets, which are akin to his own poetry. Accordingly, his analysis of the thirtieth sonnet echoes with the “Lament over Belgrade”: Shakespeare, he says, is recalling the past,

lost friends, the bitterness of survivors, when he “pays again as if he hadn’t already” (168) (“Yan Mayen, and my Srem, and Paris, my dead friends...”).

This diversity of motifs, characteristic of Crnjanski’s fundamentally impressionistic analysis, slowly begins to acquire a stronger framework when, in the thirty-fifth sonnet, drama is introduced. Crnjanski writes about the *Sonnets* in 1930; Jan Kott, one of the most original and significant Shakespearians of the previous century, gives his interpretation of these poems three decades later and – according to many – is the first to notice the sort of dramatically set out relationships between the characters, which Crnjanski also noticed. Of course, Kott didn’t read our poet and take over his idea; still, it is not a small injustice that no one else read him either, in which case there would be someone to testify to the fact that Crnjanski had sensed the dramatic charge of the *Sonnets* much before Kott, and fascinated by this drama, paused before it almost as if in fear, spellbound by the poet’s, at first glance, hidden but incredibly daring and disarming honesty: “Without preparation, without allusions, as if a curtain had been lifted on a comedy or tragedy, we find ourselves before Shakespeare’s stage, only this time, he is the only one doing the acting, in his life.” (169) Carried away by the story, which he discerns among the verses, Crnjanski doesn’t resist the temptation that “here” is “there” and he adds: “It is very unlikely that the setting of this novel was only one town. It is unlikely that they were both in London the entire time. Perhaps even rarely.” (175) Moreover, in the novel, which he (quite instinctively) begins writing with an English playwright as the coauthor, he also defines the genre: “this is an extraordinary, psychological, romance novel written in sonnets.” (169)

Following this condensed, thematically varied first part, with continual elevated emotions, in which at times it seems like the poet/critic knows not where to turn first in an attempt to capture the essence of the skill of the playwright/poet (or, one could say, actor/poet), in the middle of the essay there is a slight decline, or simply a pause. Enraptured by their beauty, Crnjanski begins to describe and recount the sonnets with almost no comments, except for noting, here and there, that it is a shame they were not arranged in a slightly different order, that is not how he would do it, or subtly noticing the connection between the rather personal element in these poems and the general spirit of the times in which they were written, whereby he says that the abrupt abyss, which suddenly appears in the sonnets, is “the abyss of life, of a horrendous, demonic life in England, in the Elizabethan era.” (179) Thus, with impressionistic admiration, using truly elated poetic expression in writing about Shakespeare’s poems, Crnjanski evokes the energy of this poetry in a slightly indirect manner and in digressions: in this case,

it is reflected and confirmed by the intensity of the critic's inspiration. So inspired, he trails the "novel" about the poet and the handsome young man to the very end, which is rounded off with their inevitable parting (he too wrote much more about partings than about moments of joy in love).

The second sequence of the *Sonnets*, about the "Dark Lady", Crnjanski finds much less interesting. He finds it boring, that is to say, he is bored by the conventionality of the abundance of traditional sonnet motifs in these thirty-odd poems, and his observations come alive only when he comes across details that diverge from this tradition (like when he notices that the 130<sup>th</sup> sonnet "reveals the vivid, physical beauty of this woman", and so "the idea of poetic, never experienced, didactic daydreams is unfounded in this case" (187-188)). Towards the end, perhaps partly due to boredom, he will pose the question as to who this woman was, and thus round out his essay in a manner similar to the way he started it: with construction and storytelling, searching for a hidden story which would give the entire collection a new dimension. Even though he doesn't quite find one, Crnjanski definitely knows how to convincingly allude to this dimension, several times in fact, in this perhaps slightly too long essay. The reason why it might be too long is perhaps because it was written by three authors: Crnjanski the poet, whom the *Sonnets* touched and inspired the most, Crnjanski the prose writer, to whom these poems serve as a pretext for imaginative expansion, and finally, Crnjanski the literary critic, who was there more out of obligation to the other two – to give their words additional legitimacy.

His experience of the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer is significantly different. The criteria – both for the choice of poet and the evaluation of the poetry – remain quite personal, although the emotional attachment here is much weaker than in the case of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, hence the approach is clearly more "scientific". When he writes about other authors, Crnjanski is generally also interested in the wider cultural picture: and, when his captivation with the poetry does not get in the way, he is able to discern and define the context of how the studied opus came to be written, both synchronically and diachronically. Likewise, in preparing to write about Chaucer, he also defines the nature of English poetry at the time when, in 1941, he arrived in England. This was, he says, a time of reaction against Eliot and Auden, against intellectualism in poetry, when the "new idol" was Dylan Thomas – who was original, inspired, and emotional. But then, the school of "academic" poetry prevailed, led by a few university professors (six of them, Crnjanski points out precisely, and to be even more precise, he adds that two were librarians, and one a civil servant.). He goes on to say that the influence of this poetry is still (in 1973) felt in Europe, and thus in our

country as well – but he has little fondness for this type of poetry. (196) For this reason, towards the end of his review of English poetry, he will devote his time to the most recent generation of poets (Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and John Fuller).

But first off, he will go back to the beginning – to be exact, first he will attempt to pinpoint this beginning; he finds it, or rather believes it to be in the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons sometime during the Migration Period, the poetry of blood and killings, warriors, which was preserved only in fragments in medieval manuscripts. The poetry of blood and killings, warriors, had to have been interesting and close to the author of *Migrations* (even *Lyrics of Ithaca*): this affinity can also be sensed in the way Crnjanski defines the space, geographical and spiritual, in which English poetry originates: A fog, an eerie fog descends over the coast, suddenly, in the midst of a summer's day, but then rises again, like a dark cloud, being devoured by the land, [sounds like a title of a chapter from *The First Book of Migrations*], which this poetry calls: the mother of man.” (197)

And then, like a master comparatist, he boldly and lucidly suggests the possible common roots of all folk poetry, pointing out that, in the Scots language, the word “gusla” means “musical instrument”, while also remarking that, in the ninth century, Alfred the Great was the first in England to mention the Serb people.

Therefore, it is not unusual for Crnjanski to feel affinity to a poet who, as he says, died eleven years after the Battle of Kosovo – even though he does not know how to spell his name (instead of *Chaucer*, he writes *Chausser*). At the same time, he also observes him from a pronouncedly contemporary (more precisely – modernistic) standpoint, and accordingly, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's most famous work, he clearly differentiates between the traditional and the new and original. The lyrical thread, concerning springtime and the celebration of warm weather, for the most part, does not arouse his interest, nor does the narrative in the individual stories – all this has already been seen in earlier poetry. Novelties, he says, are found mostly in Chaucer's psychology, in his understanding of men and women, and especially love. Both in the *Tales* and in *Troilus and Cressida*. For great poets, a single verse is sometimes enough for them to sense all the greatness of another poet. For Crnjanski, this verse was: *If no love is, o good, what fele I so?* The comment, from the pen of the poet who, in a remarkably similar mood, wrote verses like: “No, I knew no sorrow, before I was born”, is worth quoting in its entirety. This is how the seventy-four-year-old Crnjanski interprets Chaucer's youthful verse:

“If not love, what then, is this feeling? If it is love, what is it and what kind? If love is good, from whence then comes this misery? And

if it is wicked, I wonder why this suffering, and the misery it brings, gives me such delight. For, the more I drink it, the thirstier I grow,” says Crnjanski entirely from the perspective of Shakespearean romantic heroes in their late teens, which is perhaps why he then adds, in a perfectly calm voice: “We will come across this tone, later, in Shakespeare.” (199) In conclusion, he further expands the comparative viewpoint and states that Chaucer’s work is tremendous, although of course, he is not Dante, but that he rightly enjoys the status of the first great English poet, and on the threshold of the Elizabethan era at that – an era, in the words of this commentator, “of England at its most brilliant, in poetry as well”. (199)

Many poets from this period attract the attention of Crnjanski – though, less with their poems because, in each case, (Thomas Wyatt, Earl of Surrey, or Edmund Spenser) he finds only a small number that are truly magnificent (in some cases only one). But rather, from a strictly romanticist standpoint, he is mostly interested in the poetic fate, the personal tragedies in their poetry, something the English call *personal feelings* (for a brief moment, it is as though Prince Nikolai Ryepnin is speaking to us, as if the author of the essay is, in the manner of Ryepnin, mocking the English, for whom poetry does not necessarily need to entail “personal feelings”, so when it does, this definitely needs to be emphasized.).

By this criterion, in other words, the tragic dimension of fate, but also the strength and nature of the poetry, of all the Elizabethan poets (not including Shakespeare, of course), he is most interested in the fearsome and enigmatic character of Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare’s main rival, who shined prematurely among the poets and playwrights of this period, and just as prematurely left this world under unexplained circumstances. “He was a shoemaker’s son” (200), emphasizes Crnjanski in a sentence dramatically singled out in a separate paragraph, in order to give additional emphasis to the thing he admires most about Marlowe: his power of transformation, so striking in the main characters of his plays (*Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*): the shoemaker’s son speaks “as if he has emerged from the ice of the Asian mountains, as if he embodies all the self-will of Tatar khans and the desire to rule the world.” (200) Crnjanski seems to want to suggest that such force is not, or not completely, of this world. By weaving a Faustian mystery, he gives Marlowe’s already mythologized character additional mythical dimensions, which had sprung from his quite personal preferences and a special feeling of closeness to this atheist (this is also especially emphasized) and anarchist, who is not the greatest when it comes to love, but rather violence, might, conquest, Tamburlaine. (So again, *Lyrics of Ithaca*, and again *Migrations*.)

Nevertheless, this special partiality will by no means stop him from giving a precise and quite accurate assessment regarding the overall value of Marlowe's opus. Marlowe's tragedies are outstanding only sporadically, which is also noted by English critics and literature historians – whom Crnjanski, when it comes to Marlowe, did not read. But, he did read Marlowe in his own characteristic manner, and thus succeeded in noticing something canonized English criticism usually neglects. That is to say, English critics emphasize that Marlowe's one-man-plays are appealing and successful mainly due to their titanic main heroes, who are not only the bearers of the plot, but each of them, in "their own" drama, is practically the only rounded and developed character in the play. Our interpreter does not deny them this aspect of greatness, but he also notices another, perhaps essential, dimension, to which the English critics did not devote enough attention – or simply ignored. Namely, Marlowe's heroes, even at the peak of their most pronounced superhuman feats, remain first and foremost "human", with distinctly human small weaknesses and whims – which become even more evident at the time of their downfall. Thus, upon Tamburlaine's return home to Samarkand, his vain desire to be seen as the ruler of the world is a whim of a man who knows that this will not last forever, and that everything, especially fame, is fleeting, and the awareness of this transience is expressed at the conclusion of this great monologue. So, Tamburlaine returns from war like Vuk Isaković, in whose case this was the last time in his life that he was handsome. And Edward the Second is presented on stage "by the shoemaker's son... not as a lavish, renaissance fornicator, and homosexual, but as a miserable man who, abandoned by all and reduced to an animal, awaits death in a foul-smelling basement of a castle." (202-203)

But again, regardless of the genuine feeling of excitement, which the verses in Marlowe's plays spark in him, Crnjanski remains focused on Marlowe mainly as a literary hero (of one of his unwritten novels). "This atheist, this anarchist... son of a proletariat..." (204) perished in a mysterious way, and our author wonders, is there also a political, secret background to this murder? And then, without forgetting to emphasize the distinctiveness of his viewpoint ("to me, as a foreigner, it seems" (205)), he gives the theories on Marlowe's death his own personal contribution: "I personally think that Marlowe was definitely a thorn in the side of some of the powerful members of the royal court, and that the relationship which he, with a doubt, had with Sir Walter Raleigh was what did him the most damage." (205)

The same Walter Raleigh is the hero of Miloš Crnjanski's next essay. That is right, the hero, because he found him interesting as well, mainly due to his fascinating life story. (After all, as a poet, Raleigh

was not on a par with most of the other poets Crnjanski wrote about.) And, after briefly explaining the pronunciation of the poet's name ("In England, today, it sounds like /ræli/, I think mainly because this is how the famous velocipedes are called in England." (207) Crnjanski indirectly reveals the reason for his keen interest in Raleigh (or 'Ræli'): he sees this poet as a man of action, experience, great historical and intellectual character, who knows the world, people and life – entire continents, and thus deserves to be read." (207) Who also "had some sort of psychopathological desire to watch the sunset and planned expeditions to the setting Sun." (208) Crnjanski, on the other hand, had a passionate and, to some extent, metaphysical (which he, it seems, would describe as "psychopathological") fondness for countries of the far north where the Sun rarely sets, but when it does it is gone for a long time. Thus, in all probability, Raleigh's life, and subsequently his works, attracts him because he can relate and feels a connection. For this reason, in the story of Raleigh's life, he is inclined to "telling stories" more than anywhere else, describing what happened and what could have happened. He wonders how Raleigh happened to become the queen's (Elizabeth's) "minion" and writes about him in the same manner in which, for example, André Maurois wrote about Shelley, or Vladimir Nabokov about Gogol, turning him into a literary hero *par excellence*. Comparing him to the latter pair of great authors is actually more fitting, since Nabokov always subjectively referred to Gogol as the greatest Russian author, receiving little support when it comes to this claim, just as Crnjanski, due to his fascination with the character of the poet (about whom his enemies would say that he knew every language in the world, except English), overestimates his poetry, by discerning intellectual and human depth in sometimes quite conventional love verses. But he soon gives up on the subject, as if he too senses that his analyses lack validity and goes back to the poet's life. What was supposed to be an essay on the poetry of Walter Raleigh is actually a story about his life.

In the case of John Donne things were quite different. (With linguistic insightfulness, Crnjanski claims that his name should be pronounced /Da:n/ and not /Dɔ:n/, which is the accepted transliteration in our language, because this was the pronunciation he used in a poem in order to make it rhyme.) His life is much less interesting to our poet, and he quickly runs through his biography. The last Renaissance poet of the Elizabethan era, whose long forgotten greatness was recalled by Thomas Stearns Eliot, (it is interesting to note that Crnjanski does not owe his discovery of Donne to Eliot; he had mentioned him back in 1920 in the journal *Srpski književni glasnik*, while Eliot's famous essay "The Metaphysical Poets", which decisively changed the perception of Donne's poetry in England, was published in 1921), attracted the attention

of Crnjanski primarily with something he had, with significantly less success, attempted to find in Raleigh: intellectual depth, but also originality, emanating from everything he had written (and he also detects that even when he writes letters to his friends, in verse, Donne is actually writing to himself). Even “in youth and foolishness, there is some kind of morbid sorrow in this poet” (222) Now, it is questionable whether or not Miloš Crnjanski is someone who should be surprised by this. He was barely twenty years old when he wrote the poem “Gardista i tri pitanja” (The Guardsman and Three Questions) (“It is a sad thing to be a man.”), and twenty-eight when he wrote “Stražilovo” (“And dust, all is dust, as I raise my hand...”). Also, how many real, great poems are there, which are not characterized by this air of morbid sorrow? Some poets overcome such sorrow by returning to religion, like Eliot, others turn mysticism, like John Donne – and yet others, like Crnjanski, never and by no means. If this were not so, there would be no “Lament over Belgrade”.

By singling out the modernistic elements in Donne’s poetry (“he writes as if he had gone to school in Paris and studied under Bergson” (223)) – the colloquial style, fascination with science, intellectualism, placing emphasize on individuality – Crnjanski agrees with Eliot, but also identifies himself, once again, as a pronounced modernist. And then, he romantically admires Donne’s love poems, as magnificent ascents of hopeless melancholy.

But when it comes to true Romanticism, Crnjanski suddenly, for a reason known only to him, decides to be “objective” and so, even though he is partial to Byron and Keats, as he himself admits, he decides to single out Shelley as the representative of this movement. It is also interesting to note that his choice is contrary to the almost unanimous opinion of English critics – and even the public, if such a thing still exists with regard to poetry, even in England. For, Shelley’s poetry, compared to the poetry of the remaining four great English romanticists, was the least read and appreciated from the time it was written. This is, in part, still the result of the public’s hostility, motivated in multiple ways, which followed Shelley more than any of his contemporaries – but, perhaps, also a reflection of the objective state of affairs: that is to say, his best work measures up to the best work of the other four – but his mediocre poems are more mediocre than those of the others, and there are more of them.

Crnjanski is interested in Shelley as the underdog, “honest and ready for sacrifice” (229), as an immigrant who lived an absurd life, filled with curious love affairs, and fought a quixotic battle, not so much for political liberties in England, but rather for some sort of abstract liberty for the whole human race. As a result, he barely touches on the

subject of his poetry, and even when he does, it is only quite routinely, emphasizing the “Ode to the West Wind”, which had already been generally accepted as Shelley’s masterpiece, without a hint of the subjective emotional colouring, as he were writing an outline for students. Just how little thought he gave to Shelley’s poetry is shown by the mistake he makes when he states that the title of Shelley’s elegy to Keats death is “Hyperion”. “Hyperion” was written by Keats, and the elegy Crnjanski is referring to is “Adonais”. He concludes the story about Shelley with this poem and finally, at the very end, discovers something “translunar” (236): the poet’s incredible prophecy of his own death, in waves. In this essay, this represents one of the rare moments of genuine inspiration on the part of the poet/critic.

However, such inspiration will not be lacking when he speaks out about his own contemporaries. Neither will harshness and depth of insight. Especially as he does not choose them, like in most of the earlier cases, according to personal preference, but “by reputation”, and thereby focuses on three poets who were read in England “in his days” and who were still relatively young at the time the essay entitled “Contemporaries” was written: Philip Larkin was 44 years old, Ted Hughes 36, and John Fuller 29. However, the analysis of the change in status, in other words, the notion of the poet and poetry is more interesting and more significant than the individual analysis of the nature of the poetry of the three leaders of the “new wave” in English poetry. According to Crnjanski, the poet “is no longer what he used to be – now, he could be one of our unassuming, quiet, thoughtful neighbours”. (236) Therefore, there are no more foolish authors, who had been creating the history of poetry from ancient times to the present, or Romantic dreamers who, in spite of emphasizing the democratic nature of their notion of poetry, underlined their uniqueness through both their actions and lifestyles (like Coleridge, Byron or Shelley); or even Victorian poets, like Tennyson, who were sacrosanct in their status of “educators of the people” and arbiters of beauty. The poet, Crnjanski concludes, has become the quiet neighbour – and how many of us are interested in the poetry written by our neighbour, even if he is not quiet?

Subsequently, it has been a long time since poetry in England (even first-rate poetry) has had the type of widespread popularity it once enjoyed. For example, in Russia, poets like Yesenin, Mayakovski, Yevtushenko, but also Okudzhava and Vysotski were the “poets of the people” up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, at the very least, while in England this sort of poetry disappeared at the end of the Victorian era, throughout which it was still read out loud, during long winter evenings, sitting around a fireplace. When the fireplace disappeared, so did the “poetry of the people”: up to 2,000 copies of poems by Eliot

and Pound were printed, while collections of poems had some chance of success only when, from time to time, for this or that reason, they entered into the sphere of popular culture. Crnjanski mentions John Betjeman as an example – spelling his name “Bentjeman” (237), whose poems were printed in 50,000 copies and sold like *ice-crejam* (as he spells it: either he has forgot the spelling of the word or he notices some distinct difference between our ice-cream and English ice-crejam, although he makes no mention of it), but only after the word spread that Princess Margaret bought the poetry collection; while the “American beatniks filled Royal Albert Hall twice, mainly because they are some kind of ‘Beatles’ poets” (237) – whatever that means.

Still, these are the exceptions, examples of poetry reduced to the level of show business, with regard to which Crnjanski does not make any value judgements. Modern English poetry is characterized by “a complete lack of exhibition” (237). One could say, like country, like poetry, or even poets: without “translunar” desires, without fervour, without beauty, and even without ornaments. According to Crnjanski, the last great “old-school” poet (as much as he was a paradigm and the epitome of Modernism), was T. S. Eliot, but only in his youth, the one who “transformed, into some sort of intellectual poetry, streets, lamps, hovels, mornings, evenings, lovers, harlots, afternoons, and the fog of a London that is now disappearing...” (239) In other words, the London from the days when Crnjanski, in 1918, wrote the poem “Mizera” (Misery) (in Vienna, for a student called Ida Lotringer), in which we also find streets, lamps...

But, that world has disappeared – and with it poetry, at least the kind of poetry that was “translunar” for centuries before. This new poetry is absurd – not because of the philosophical beliefs with which it is infused, but rather because it is written for everyone, and no one is reading it – not only when, like in the case of Ted Hughes, the poem talks about a dead pig, but also when it deals with stories from crime columns, like in the poem “In a Railway Compartment” by John Fuller (the title of which Crnjanski translates literally, although “kompartiman” is non-existent in Serbian), which talks about an attack by a sex maniac. In newspapers, most people will scroll over this type of article; in a poetry collection, versus dedicated to such an incident cause shock, and then even disgust – far more intense than the most detailed description in a newspaper article could cause. What else can poets, who trudged through blood, or mud, up to their knees, with no dreams left, write about? Is the beginning of the end of poetry hidden in this aesthetic of ugliness, horror, and depravity?

No, says Crnjanski, despite everything, defending poetry from itself. For, according to him, each epoch has a different answer to the

question of what poetry is. He also adds that poetry is eternal, even though what poets write about is changeable, just like life. This is evident in his review and cross-section of English poetry: arbitrary and subjective, this cross-section, in its own unfathomable manner, is also perfectly precise and reliable. The quality of ingenuity is impossible to hide – even if you are a literary critic. Of course, this does not mean that you must be a great Serbian poet to understand the nature and essence of English poetry. Not necessarily, but it does not hurt if you are.

Translated from Serbian by  
*Persida BOŠKOVIC*

SVETOZAR KOLJEVIĆ

## BORISLAV PEKIĆ AND ENGLISH CULTURE

### 1. INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Pekić's encounters with English culture have different roots – living, personal, literary, philosophical and political – and not only are their literary forms diverse, but his observations on the English culture are scattered throughout many of his writings. Already in his childhood, during the Second World War, he listened to BBC radio broadcasts, so that by the end of his twenty-year stay in England (1971-1992), he worked as a freelance commentator in the Serbo-Croatian department of BBC and wrote series of reportages on English life and history, which represent a humorous and fruitful dialogue with English culture, and also raise wider issues of European civilisation and history. There, then, he wrote his first major “English” novel, *Rabies* (1983), after ten years of residence in England, placed on the English soil and set in the English contemporary and cultural history, in which the writer appears solely as an observer and not as a participant in the life that surrounds him, and in that sense it powerfully dramatizes, among other things, Pekić’s life in England. And the very next year, in 1984, his negative utopia *1999* was published, dedicated to the memory of Orwell’s then already famous *1984* (1949) with significant allusions also to Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). Finally, in some of his “Gothic stories” in *New Jerusalem*, which is a typical English genre, Pekić, sometimes in a grotesque form, alludes to some forms of contemporary “witch-hunting”, bringing into the images the allusions to the trial of the members of the Union of Democratic Youth of Yugoslavia in May 1949, the trial at which these youngsters got a total of, as he said, “170 years in prison, though not all of us were on trial.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Borislav Pekić, “Getting out of the Dark”, Others on Pekić, edited by Liljana Pekić, Mihajlo Pantić, Otkrovenje, Belgrade, 2002, p. 11. This interview with Pekić,

If these stories are a sign of invoking English literary spirits, they are also, at the same time, allusions to Pekić's memory of his five-year imprisonment where he caught tuberculosis. Finally, while Pekić still as a young man was imprisoned for democracy, by the end of his life he actively participated in politics as a founder and a vice-president of the Democratic Party (1990), his writings – discursive, fictional and fantastical – are often riddled with political and philosophical questions of human freedom and its restriction. After all, Pekić himself, as a very young man, saw literature as an “aesthetic correlate of philosophy”.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. BBC: 1986-1987

### *Letters from Abroad*

Pekić's encounters with the English forms of life, behaviour and thinking – which are usually different from the rest of the world, and especially from what his fictional compatriot, Živorad, represents – were, from the beginning, a paradox that borders with absurdity. Already, this is typical of Pekić's later forming his own memories, but also for better understanding of Pekić's worldview and for shaping his own prose the way he remembered the details of his own life being much more important than how much that memory was reliable – as, after all, human history is created more by the way it is remembered than by “what really happened.” According to Pekić, his first encounter with English culture happened during the Second World War in the Banat village of Bavanište, where Pekić, as he puts it, “nicely spent all four war years on his mother's estate, which was later expropriated.”<sup>3</sup> There, as a boy, he was one of the several listeners of the BBC's news in Serbian language, in the company of his father, several of his friends and the “official enemy” (11), Colonel Richter, commander of the Wehrmacht local garrison. Thus, Radio London came into his life, as he puts it, “by no means owing to my patriotism, but for the unpatriotic feelings of a German officer” (11). At first, this news seemed to him like a call from a drowning man to the other “to be kept afloat at all costs” (12), and later as a suggestion to “go from applauding the English people to killing the Germans”, which would be “not at all difficult if only a man starts

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which was hosted by Miško Lazović and Dragan Belić, was originally published in Demokratija, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See: Milan Radulović, “Aesthetic and Autopoietic Contemplations of Borislav Pekić”, Memorial of Borislav Pekić, edited by Predrag Palavestra, SASA, Scientific Seminars, HSU1 Book, Department of Language and Literature, Book 1.

<sup>3</sup> Borislav Pekić, “A Letter to the Reader”, Selected Letters from Abroad, Selected Works, Book 10, Solaris, Novi Sad, 2004, p. 11. In further quotations page numbers from this book will be given in parentheses.

doing it”(12). Much later, however, he learned that at the same time the BBC advised the inhabitants of the English Channel Islands under German occupation to “remain calm and obey the occupying authorities” (13).

About fifteen years after his arrival in England – “which is probably the average speed of the events happening here” (13) – Pekić was invited to write every second week about his impressions on English life for the BBC and so a series of reportages were aired from 1986 to 1987 under the title *Letters from London*, shortly thereafter published in a book *Letters from Abroad* (1987). Pekić was not quite sure if he accepted the offer “out of vanity,” or “out of spite,” but it would not be easy to conclude either from those texts. Namely, it would not be easy to say whether the English performed better in them or the “compatriot”, the fictional Živorad, who, as a caricature, is often contrasted with them. These contrasts are again regularly marked by paradoxes bordering absurdity – as, after all, Crnjanski also – firmly believed, as he says in the essay “The writer and the Foreign Country”, that the “true writer”, “wherever and however he lived (...) will always belong to the history and destiny of his people.” (16) True, “both we and they are people”, “but if you look around you will find that it means very little” (17).

This is clearly seen, for example, in the essay “What would Živorad do with Ireland”, which is talking about the difference between the relation of the ordinary English people and our Živorad with the so-called “Irish issue”. An ordinary Englishman, especially the one who visits department stores being “exposed to the occasional Irish bombings”, might think that it would be the best if “the chaos of geological history never brought” Ireland “to the surface of the Atlantic, or at least not in their neighbourhood” (24). But he still “patiently and heartily” deals with the problem. (25) Our Živorad, who flew on a charter and “immediately became an expert on Britain”, already waving with *Politika* still at the airport asks his interlocutor: “*What on earth are these fucking Englishmen doing to these unfortunate Irish people*” (26). However, he very quickly reconciles his attitude with his reality – when, due to a bomb alarm, he has to retreat to a hotel room and drink brandy in his underpants. When asked what he would do about the Irish, he then replied: “*I would all of them, if you see what I mean*” (26). So, he would make them a head shorter, that is, in the spirit of “our martial psychology” (26), as Pekić puts it in Serbian, maybe already being “infected” by the English language virus. But did Churchill not, apparently, in one of his interviews immediately after The Second World War, while talking about the Irish issue, patiently pointed out that it was a religious conflict that would surely be resolved – in The Last Judgement! And does that legendary English patience explain how they were once able to build

the only empire in the history of the world “in which the sun never sets, unlike certain nations to whom it seems it has never even risen” (24).

The essay “Anglo-Saxon Manners” is quite interesting in this general context of paradoxical contrasts of the English and our natures. The sacred rule of privacy in England obliges you not to interfere with other people’s problems, for example, not to approach a man lying in the street at midnight because what do you know – “that person can die in your arms or rip you with a knife,” which might be followed by “innumerable administrative complications” (34). However, our Živorad, will immediately approach him, and as he is the “first aid expert, he will try to bring him back to life”, and if “he does not kill him as a consequence of his clumsiness – or the other one kills him – he will become his best man” (34). Besides, Živorad is always a “pretty honest” (34) man: An Englishman “will never tell you that you look awful even when you’re dying”, while Živorad will “ask you at what time your funeral is scheduled” (34). The truth is that the Englishman will also escort you to the grave, “but he will quickly withdraw and leave you to deal with it by yourself” while we, you see “do not leave even our dead ones alone” (34). Of course, these may all be considerations of different stereotypes of the national characters, but contrasting those stereotypes, not to say caricatures, it enhances them considerably. Moreover, it introduces them into various political contexts and associations, which are significant in Pekić’s case, because in some of his books and especially in *A Sentimental History of the British Empire*, they also represent the angle of his perceptions of history and human destinies.

In the essay “Fanaticism or Persistence of Belief?” Pekić considers the various forms of cruelty in all human history. Stating that in ancient times Christians were “thrown to the lions for the reasons of state,” he points out that this endeavour would not be so “efficient”, as it was, if it was not supported by “fanaticism of the mob in the arena” (36). On the other hand, however, the bloodsheds of our “enlightened age” were often “supported by cold Reason” as some kind of a “perverted idea” (37). Without this “grotesque consent,” it would be difficult to understand “why in the Soviet Union, the doctrine that considers itself both rational and philanthropic, chose its victims among those biggest ones who turned it into reality by their personal renunciations” (37). Or, how was it possible for Oliver Cromwell, famous for his common sense as the leader of the revolution, to burn “innocent women as witches” (38)? And how to explain that one of Pekić’s English interlocutors accepts the explanation that the events in Kosovo were the result of innate Balkan fanaticism, while the suggestion by a preacher from Northern Ireland that all the Catholics should be “burned alive” is judged as

“perhaps a little exaggerated – just the persistence of belief” (38)! Wouldn’t that be one of a few examples of coincidence between us and the English, as well as some other nations – examples where it is seen that “our own faults always have nicer names than the others” (38)? And couldn’t Pekić’s argument be understood in a wider context – for example, by the etymology of the word “liquidation”, present in many civilised languages, regardless of the fact that it is not a matter of transforming into a liquid state?

This politicisation of characterology and language is also reflected in the consideration of the former respect for old men, while the modern phenomenon considers them superfluous. In his essay “On an Old Age being a Burden to God as well,” Pekić says that today “we are getting old, becoming obsolete faster than any generation in the history of species” (45), all the more so when it comes to a more developed country. That is why the writer recommends his Živorad to seek employment in England, but to grow old at home. On the other hand, however, children in England, unlike in our world, feel no obligation to their parents, while we “in the emotional Balkans” tend to “allow our mothers, after the torments they have been through with us”, “to trouble themselves about our children as well”(47). Even when he talks about immigrant loneliness of elderly people (“Portrait of a Loneliness”), again with a slight political connotation, Pekić points out that even in an old people’s home, one cannot escape from it, even though – it can ease that feeling of loneliness a little, because “his loneliness will not become minor, but at least it will be – common” (21).

At every step of his contrasting Englishmen with Živorad, Pekić nevertheless finds that “the best England has him given is better understanding of his own people,” as he puts it in his essay on “The Skill of Overestimation and the Art of Underestimation” (96). But what in that context means our paradoxical tendency to overestimate our rights when complaining that “hospitals are overcrowded if there are only two patients in beds, when there is obviously place for the three” (98)? And does not that paradox slip into the language when the English answer the question what it was like during the war, saying that it was “bearable”, “exciting”, “interesting” at the time, while Živorad would “use one of our universal verbs for torment – which, paradoxically, originally signifies enjoyment” (97)? And this kind of double-edged humour is an essential feature of almost all of Pekić’s contrasting English and Serbian natures, history and politics, for the paradox is one of the basic features of his literary storytelling. Is not that paradox also reflected in his parting with England: “goodbye Britain! – “As a member of my nation, I have nothing to thank you for. As Borislav Pekić, I owe you” (478)?

### 3. BBC: 1988-1991

#### *A Sentimental History of the British Empire*

*A Sentimental History of the British Empire* was a result of the series of radio reportages, triple-expanded later in a book published in 1992, with the writer's feeling that it was his latest tale of the English and England as a life shelter he found abroad. The story is based on a thorough study of existing knowledge, standard English political and social histories, especially those written by its participants and accomplices, such as Winston Churchill and Lloyd George. But Pekić points out that little known works written by anonymous enthusiasts took his heart (...) those with a sense of *living life*,<sup>4</sup> "which describe the everyday life of the ordinary Englishmen in different historical periods, their behaviour, customs, way of thinking, types of entertainment, living conditions and even cutlery". In the background of that "living history" from the books, as he paradoxically points out, is the "grief" for the true living history, the one he was taught about in the Balkans in 1944 "from a fresh and somewhat bloody life, not from stale, boring books" (13).

There are, then, in addition to vivid details in a broad historical context, also various doubts and reasoning. Where does English history actually begin:

whether from the cult creation of Stonehenge, or from Celtic or Roman times, the arrival of Angles and Saxons, the "blood-origin of the English people" (18), or, perhaps, it starts from the Battle of Hastings (1066), after which Norman and Anglo-Saxon blood was "mixed into a racial amalgam" (18)? Did the end of the empire happen on the eve of the First World War, or when joining the European Union as a "silent diminishing" of British state sovereignty (17), or maybe, in the "triumphant defence" of Falkland Islands as a "ceremonial international requiem" for the empire (18)? And what does the word "sentimental" mean in the title as the writer's attitude to the history of human life in Europe's politically and culturally most significant island?

Pekić points out that his word should not be "taken literally" or ironically "reversed without any reservation" (7), and that ambiguity of Pekić's "sentimental" view of English history is often reflected in his parallels and contrasts between the English and Balkan, especially Serbian, history. This can be seen, for example, in his speculation on

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<sup>4</sup> Borislav Pekić, "Preface", *Sentimental History of the British Empire*, Second Edition, Selected Works, Book 5, Solaris, Novi Sad, 2006, p. Further quotations from this book include page numbers in parentheses.

when the first Serb and Englishman could meet. Whether it was at the Byzantine court in Constantinople, around 1000, in a hall filled with an unbearable disgusting odour of distinguished guests from Francia? Namely, these eminent guests “bathed only on two occasions: at birth and after death” (24), so there were cases of some Byzantines who used to faint from the stench at such receptions! But didn’t the English many centuries later receive our “diplomatic reciprocal gift” when an English deputy stepped into a horse manure, “stepping down from his carriage” to be received “into a credential audience with the Prince of the Obrenović House” (25)? What and in what way is it “sentimental” – is “sentimental”, in the literal sense, the evocation of the former Balkan and even Serbian civilisation as some kind of an ancient scent, or does the word “sentimental” ironically determine the contrast between the former “fragrance” of Byzantine civilisation and Serbian horse manure as the “diplomatic reciprocal gift” to the West? And is Pekić not in his own political sense “sentimental” when he ironically mentions “several English *Trojan gifts*” to the Serbs: “coup d'état on the 27 March 1941, a speech given by King Peter II in 1943, in which he gave up on General Mihailović and sided with Josip Broz, as well as the cruel devastation of Belgrade in 1944” (14)? And what would he just say if he was still alive, about bombing of Serbia in 1999?

Whether it is and in what sense is “sentimental” his frequent evocation of “the proverbial English slowness they like to call meticulousness” (31) – often in contrast to the compulsiveness of our Živorad, our upheavals and revolutionary developments? It is interesting in this context that Pekić points out that “Europe (...) also carried out its revolutions with the professional consistency of historical butcher”, while the English “carried out their own one almost under wraps” (29). Unlike the “titanic historical struggle that created modern France or the contribution to the birth of Bolshevik Russia,” English parliamentary democracy grew as “the harmonious outcome of a gradual multiple compromise, the most important instrument of English national and state life” (39). Could the subtext here also imply any, even if ambiguous, “sentimental” contrast to Serbian history and national life?

And what to say about Western views of Slovenian nomads who used to “hang” around the Balkans and who will “after the Hellenic glory of the ‘barrel of wisdom’ bring them the glory of the ‘barrel of gunpowder’” (65)? Or of Pekić’s thoughts at the very beginning of the *Sentimental History* when he often welcomed the events in English history “as a paradigm for his own history when the conversation becomes entangled with the fateful question of why the present and future do not give any hope to the Serbian people, and the past is too difficult to repeat it with pleasure” (7)? And what is the sentimental comfort for

us that “we” used to eat with “silver forks (...) in the Serbian court while the English were learning what their fingers are used for” (20)?

There are also many other relations, by analogy or contrast, with Balkan history. Thus, for example, the Celtic massacre of Romans and Romanized Britons “which according to the motives reminds of Njegoš’s investigation of *poturica* (Serbs converted into Islam)” (44), our mythical hero Marko Kraljević, is much more humbly legendary fictional than King Arthur, who “goes to war in the good company of Noah and Alexander” (56). The creation of the English language from Norman and Anglo-Saxon components made possible the creation of the English nation, while Serbs and Croats provide “the opposite evidence of increasing separation on the basis of an increasingly similar language” (79). The language of the *Magna Carta Libertatum* is clear and simple, so it was already different from “most of our laws” (98). During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, both the English and the Serbs “did a lot” to ruin their countries, but England emerged stronger than ever “from that historic *galamatias* (rigmarole)”, while the Serbs, with their capable rulers, from Stefan Nemanja to Milutin and Dušan, managed to “ruin their empire” (104).

In addition to these and similar ones, clear and understandable parallels and contrasts in the *Sentimental History* narrative, we face numerous examples of more complex tonal articulation because of the enigmatic nature of historical “truth,” because “historical facts, supposedly verified, are so much like the presumptions that they are often hardly distinguished from each other” (50). Moreover, there may be different and even contradictory truths about particular events in history. Thus, for example, Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek scholarship call the Balkan wars “liberating” and Macedonian “conquering” (16), like “our” affiliation in 1918 some consider as “liberation, and the other occupation” (106). There is also one particular angle by Pekić from which the extreme questions of the spiritual meaning of historical movements are raised, such as when he says that thanks to the “industrial revolution” we have become “useful producers from useless people” (18)! Or when he, as a writer and an artist, mentions, in the context of ancient, prehistoric bronze goblets on the graves, “that the basic condition of the most widely understood that the aesthetic form is uselessness, so if we notice a bulge or pattern on the knife that does not directly serve the killing, we will include it in the artistic legacy of the epoch depending in which geological layer it was found” (31-32). Why Pekić chose the “knife” as an example of the artistic legacy and spiritual endeavour? Is it in the spirit of tradition and historical exposure to violence so that in Serbian language it is said that someone is “dead asleep”?

At the same time, *A Sentimental History* sometimes reveals Pekić's self-portrait in the subtext. Thus, his reflections on alienation, as one of the great characteristics of his personal and artistic life, emerges under the remark that the first, and also the later inhabitants of England, were foreigners – “all the inhabitants of this country are immigrants, in a way they are all aliens (foreigners), which does not help us, contemporary aliens, but it comforts us” (26). He goes back to the same issue when thinking about the sense of “estrangement” which the Romans must have felt when embarking in England, an “unknown land” that owed Rome “nothing” (78) and then when using English phraseology in describing “the invasions” of Angles and Saxons, as “new ‘damn’ foreigners”, coming to the Island (53). Even when speaking about the Anglo-Saxon defeat at the Battle of Hastings, “wickedly speaking (...) it was a great fortune”, because a victory for the Anglo-Saxons would have made England “further away from Europe”, which, by the way, might correspond to the “intimate wishes of every Islander”, “but would inevitably lead “to the decadence of complete isolation” (68). And, finally, when he speaks of the “insignificant historical interregnum” between the death of Henry VIII (1547) and the coronation of Elizabeth I (1558) as a time when “an ineradicable hatred towards any attempt made by foreigners to interfere in their affairs (not their own in the others’, of course)” (147), as well as mentioning that James I, after William the Conqueror, was the “first monarch – a foreigner” on the English throne, though he “through his grandmother, actually ‘had’ Tudor blood” (156).

But the most significant aspect of this “self-portrait in the subtext” is certainly the stylistic sparkle – a happily-found linguistic statement that flashes a sharp view of this or that appearance, of the world and of life. When he speaks, for example, of the oaths given by the defeated British tribes to the Caesar’s obedience, being “as sincere as the island sky” (41), he is also noting that “Byzantinism as a treachery is not a Balkan discovery but a general place in history” (41). When then he says that “Pax Romana – Roman Peace” arrives on the top of the legionary spears (42), even when he mentions Queen Boadicea as one of the few “heroines in this exclusively male history” (43). Boadicea, in fact, leads the “last uprising against the Romans” and “starts the tradition of local ‘iron ladies’” that goes “through” Elizabeth I and “ends” with Margaret Thatcher (43). It is interesting in this regard and description of King Arthur as a man who “probably knelt in front of the altar during the day, and at night, in the company of pagan magicians and underground gnomes on goats, played around Druid altars,” a man “who, in addition to the moral greatness of the saint, possessed the practicality of a merchant, without which as a saint even at that age, he would not be able to prove himself.” (58) Isn’t that already a true novelistic portrait, which can be

read in a figurative sense and as a description of other historical great men? It is also characteristic of a “present-day fancy” London suburb, as a place where, before the Battle of Hastings, Londoners “chased bears and wolves if not already chasing each other.” (63) Is this not at the same time a picture of history of the universal infamy? Well, in a similarly colourful way, Elizabeth I is described as “the first woman to leave a mark of iron hand in this exclusively masculine land” (148), and in her love life the puzzle is whether she was “innocent, frigid, discreet or just plain cunning”. (154)

Finally, that story is written in a certain sense of universal, ironic response to some assumptions, not to say prejudices, of highly civilised nations about cruelty as characteristics of primitive environments. Thus, in describing the “bloody end” of the Battle of Hastings, Pekić mentions that William the Conqueror will not comply with the plea of King Harold’s widow to “bury her husband with dignity” but he “erected a tent for the triumphant feast (...) at the place of his death” and “to the rebelled citizens of Alencon he “threw the dug eyes and ripped out hands of the prisoners over the rampart. (70) In this context, however, he mentions, by the way, that Commander of Auschwitz Hoess dined “in the neighbourhood of the crematorium”, that the prisoners were “massively mutilated and mistreated in the last war”, and that “the most beautiful part of Bucharest was displaced (...) and the land levelled to make space for the Potemkin monuments of the communist utopia” (70). It is also true that, at the time of William the Conqueror, the killing of the king’s deer was more expensive than the “murder of the king’s subject”, that the killing of the “Norman” was “more liable for the punished than the crime against the Anglo-Saxon”, but was it not “far below the cruelty of enlightening retribution of the twentieth century, when, during the war, hundreds of innocent people were shot for one murdered occupier” (71)? In short, pulling a knife seems more terrible than firing a bullet, or pushing a button, but in its effect, that bullet and pressure can also be signs of cruelty of much wider scale.

As Queen Victoria’s “golden age” also shows, it contained “a good deal of lead” (247). If that was the time of the “Empire in which the sun never sets,” it didn’t mean much for that wretch who used to sleep under the bridges of the Thames, as “probably, for many other Englishmen, to whom it has not even risen yet” (247). If the Victorian ideal was “*standing on your own two feet*”, which ruled England even after Margaret Thatcher, enabled many Englishmen to live independently, even today, according to Pekić, there are “two and a half million unemployed, along with seven and a half million members of their families, who are lying on the ground, without much prospect of ever rising from it” (247). Yet “material successes are indisputable”, followed by “those

in the field of social progress” – “but from afar” (256). All those observations do not mean the negation of success, but serve as a sign of negation of political and historical facades, which implies that behind it there is some kind of paradise on earth. After all, Queen Victoria could have been so classy that she corresponded with her husband “even though they lived door to door” (257), but it should not be insisted that Victorian morality was “double” – for it was “just as much as any other, as much as our moral, the morals according to which we live in peace and understanding in our century” (256).

In short, there are some achievements of great civilisations, at least in material terms, but they are far from what these civilisations offer us as an idealised image of themselves. Is not, after all, that “darkened side of the Victorian gold medal”, being reflected in its “general hypocrisy, until the deteriorating taste to the degree, which, disturbed by national complacency and eclectic exaggerations finally ruined Victorian art” (251)? That, of course, does not give us any right to look down onto the past, those of us who found ourselves in the twentieth century, “which had arranged two great world wars, living for a good bit of time as a clay pigeon on the edge of the third, which performed the revolution and made all future things superfluous, and then turned it into a general tyranny of immense scope and depth” (257)? How, then, do we have the right to mock “a century which is aware of its insufficiencies, sought to neutralise them step by step” (257)? Although, of course, it failed to do so. Such gloom in Pekić’s view of the development of Western civilisation is significant, first and foremost, as a deep foundation of his poetic imagination in everything that will actually blossom in his negative utopias, novels and short stories, in which he will shape his experience of the world with relentlessness of rational logic, into the images of the futile pursuit of the human race for some sense and harmony.

#### 4. NEGATIVE UTOPIAS

*Rabies (1983), 1999(1984)*

After the great success of the first novel from the cycle about Njegovan – *The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan* (1970) – Pekić was given back his confiscated passport and was able to join his wife Ljiljana the following year, who had moved to London as an architect the year before. And then, as it was noticed, “the wide stream of his novels, plays, essays, diary entries came from remote London as through a broken dam” and “Pekić’s literary work grew quickly to many thousands of

printed pages.”<sup>5</sup> However, in what sense is Mihiz’s observation right when he says that Pekić became “in that foreign city, with each written line more and more here and more and more ours”?<sup>6</sup> Of course, this observation is correct if we bear in mind that two years after his stay in England, Pekić offered Nolit and Prosveta the manuscript of his *Taste of Honey* trilogy, whose parts were published a little later (*The Rise and Fall of Icarus Gubelkian – 1975*, *The Defence and the Last Days – 1977*, *How to Quiet a Vampire – 1977*), as well as seven volumes of the *Golden Fleece* which were also written and published at that time (1978-1986). However, during his stay in England, next to his essays about English modernity and history, Pekić wrote several negative utopias and stories that were not only inspired but also shaped by the spirit of the English and European literary tradition. The most striking example of this kind is *Rabies* (1983), but also the novel *1999* (1984), as well as some “Gothic stories” in the collection *New Jerusalem* (1988). Whether he and in what sense even in those works, and especially in *Rabies* which was awarded in our country as the most widely read book by the local author that year, Pekić became more and more “ours” by his tragic sense of human destiny?

Perhaps this is why it is worth wondering how *Rabies*, as an absurd philosophical thriller, often at the border of science fiction is set in the environment of the English modernity, history, culture and language? Firstly, the main plot takes place at London’s Heathrow Airport, which in several places is referred to as the “largest air intersection of the world”,<sup>7</sup> or “as the city, the air metropolis of the world” (276), and in that respect represents a characteristic junction of Western civilisation on English soil. In addition, English people are, the heroes of the novel, and many foreigners, as a rule, appear in a distinctly English context. There are also frequent allusions and observations about the English nature and behaviour, which are very close to what Pekić will soon express in his discourse prose in *The Letters from Abroad* and *The Sentimental History of the British Empire*. There are also occasional quotes from the English writers, from John Donne, through Dr Johnson to Churchill and Orwell, as well as the linguistic turns that are referring to the English culture in various ways. Finally, Jonathan Swift, following genre-based classification, could be considered as a forerunner of this kind of fictional prose, according to some elements of anthropological science fiction and sarcastic view of the human race, of that, as

<sup>5</sup> Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, “Borislav Pekić –A Sketch for a Portrait”, *Others on Pekić*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Borislav Pekić, *Rabies*, Solaris, Novi Sad, 2002, p. 30, 430 etc. Further quotations from this novel include page numbers given in the text in parentheses.

Pekić says in his introductory note, “para-literary genre”, in which the events in the book are “fictitious” so that only “their possibility” is “real”. (7). Finally, everything in that novel, as an image of Western civilisation, and perhaps as the fate of the human race, is a sign of betrayed expectations.

Such is the starting point of the plot, which is initially presented as a detailed plan for a terrorist attack on Heathrow, which the alleged terrorist, disguised as a priest, carries in his breviary. However, it is shown that the “terrorist”, in the text called Poluks, is in fact the English novelist Daniel Leverquin, known by the literary alias as Patrick Cornell (32-33), and that he has in the breviary the handwriting of his novel about some kind of terrorist action. Just as Pekić “studied to the smallest details the clinical forms of that disease and the entire internal organisation, infrastructure and complicated bloodstream of London’s largest airport” for Rabies (...),<sup>8</sup> so Leverquin went to the airport to check the technical details he had put into his novel because “he has to inform himself about everything he writes about first-hand” (145). But as the breviary slips out of his hand at one point, a “conscientious” German will see the text of the terrorist plan and zealously report him to the police, which immediately responds by interrogating and harassing the novelist. Therein lies the illustration of a “successful” but senselessly organised civilisation, the indication that is already evident in the novelist’s earlier observation that the airport, when functioning normally, is a “human production plant, a giant meat processing machine, into which Underground tunnels, escalators, buses and cars are loading startling amounts of human raw material into all the openings, so that the raw material can be returned to the other openings in an instant...” (100). Next to it, as in every highly developed civilisation, at Heathrow as well, “Most travellers (...) knew where they were going, though not always why” (100).

Even a novelist who offers us that very image as if he is constantly “pretending to be English” to everything that is happening around him, and is there anything essentially “more English” than that, at least in the Serbian language? True, he must pretend to be a “true Englishman” because he is a novelist: his mission is to collect material for his work, not to change the world, and these two things are mutually exclusive. As he himself says in his “Diary” which he keeps, when the chaos caused by rabies, parallel with the chaos of countermeasures in quarantine, spreads throughout the airport:

“I’m here to listen, watch, remember. SURELY NOT TO PARTICIPATE. If I would indulge in reality, participate in it (...), my ability of

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<sup>8</sup> Predrag Palavestra, “The Urn on the Bookshelf”, *Others on Pekić*, edited by Ljiljana Pekić, Mihajlo Pantić, Otkrovenje, Belgrade, 2002, p. 76-77.

sound reasoning would decline in proportion to the degree of my participation (...) One could be a writer or a man. To be both is absolutely impossible." (261). And as he repeats later: "I HAVE A MISSION. I AM AN EYE AND AN EAR. I AM THE WITNESS. ...aware of the tough role of a man who descends into hell, and who instead of a hose for extinguishing fire carries a thermometer to measure its temperature" (320).

On the opposite end of the writer as a witness of the chaos there is also an Englishman, Major Hilary Lawford, who introduces "order" and eventually takes command of the security in the quarantine at the airport. He is aware of the slowness and inefficiency of the English bureaucracy: the third compulsory London airport could not be started even ten years after the deadline, while the French, Japanese, Americans and others were quick to solve those problems. He is scared, as a man of action, that England will soon "become the antiquary of Europe" and then the "trashcan at the back door" of Paris and New York (92). In this "patriotism" he is also ready for mass killing of adversary passengers – after all, the fewer "people at the airport, the lower the risk of transmission" at the airport (413). Other Englishmen, predominantly "airport staffers, are just positions" (7), as Pekić says in his introductory note, both those in charge of security and those who take care of the flow of traffic, people and luggage or those who are just smiling constantly.

In another way, many politicians, including the foreign minister and the prime minister, are also, in their own way, mere "positions". The only significant exception is Dr John Hamilton, a passionate scientific researcher who works on finding serum against rabies. He is a man who is "inspired by rabies", who sees the patient as "something that can take him to the knowledge of the virus and then to the virus 'in vivo', so that eventually that living virus will be transformed 'into the virus' in vitro and which can be cultivated in test tubes (257). That is exactly where Dr Hamilton differs from his colleague, Dr Komarowsky, a Pole who is bent over the sick whom he actually cannot help, except that he can still make their dying easier.

This Pole is in a sense typical foreigner presented in an ironically coloured English context. When he tells his English colleague, Dr Pheapsom, that "canine rabies" appeared on Heathrow (140), the Englishman tells him that it is "impossible": "Because this is not Poland", "Because we are in Britain", "Because we have eradicated rabies in Britain" (141). Then the Pole replies – also aiming at the misconceptions that every highly developed civilisation cherish about itself – that rabies in England is "eradicated" by statistics, but that "those poor virus bastards do not know that the United Kingdom is *Rabies-free*, a land free from rabies "which cannot go mad like the rest of the damn world" (141). To make the irony even more incisive, Dr Komarowsky is presented as a relatively

reputable physician on Heathrow until the onset of the rabies, but he feels that as a doctor at the airport, he has no real job, that he is “choked” at Heathrow, that he is “*out of place*” there as well as he in “in his marriage, in science, in this country”, “perhaps even in life itself” (80). Therefore, he keeps in his drawer the resignation from his job for weeks and dreams that he is going to “pack up and return to Poland” (80). In England, his marriage “did not fall apart from the internal explosions of a disagreeable temperament, but simply withered away in the civic routine” (64), which is again a kind of allusion to English life-forms? And finally, in the characteristic English turnover, in what the English call an “*understatement*,” Komarowsky thinks that “rabies, of course, is not exactly what he meant when he complained about the medical monotony” of Heathrow after his former, much more interesting scientific medical career (144).

Other foreigners, too, are portrayed in this novel in various ways within the tragicomic game of national stereotypes, which, sometimes, as in the case of Dr Komarovsky, are ironically clarified within the “international theme” that unmasks them. Often, truthfully, that game remains within the traditional comic frame of the mockery of foreigners. So, for example, is it completely coincidental that the pickpocket who was arrested by the police is the Bulgarian, Balkan, immigrant? But when they found on him few “wallets, watches, and some jewellery” (331), he remains optimistic in his immigrant misery. To the thought of how meaningless the theft is in such an environment of death, he answers: “And if I don’t die?” (331), regardless that after two hours he himself would get rabies. Similarly, a Lebanese cashes in on his “smuggling experience from the deadly three-state border of Syria, Lebanon and Israel” by finding a secret passage at Heathrow and transferring passengers from a more dangerous to a less dangerous area at the airport.

Is it a coincidence in this game of national stereotypes that petty cash clerk Hans Magnus Landau is German? He had, for some of his fraud, just killed his bank manager at the airport, but as a “German idiot” (145), with the mask of a conscientious citizen, he misunderstood the novelistic text of the Leverquin breviary on the terrorist act and reported Leverquin to the police, believing, as Leverquin puts it, “that the civic conscience exhausts itself in colluding with the police” (270). And is it a coincidence that the English police receive that report so zealously that it exposes Leverquin to physical violence while requiring a confession? Even when that same German touches the bartender on the shoulder to ask for a glass of water, the bartender will warn him, in the context of contagion, that it is enough just to say what he needs, and the German will tell him that “it is not necessary to be rude either”.

(268) To that, the bartender will ask him if he is not by chance a German, and warn that “this is what should have been thought of in 1939” (268). It is also characteristic that Ruben, a young Polish Jew, who had so easily found a common youth language with Miriam Mahmud, being initially convinced that she was “undoubtedly Jewish” (223) However, when their two families face each other, when “Jews and Arabs” see each other “at the same time” (403), another incidental war begins in the general rage of the airport. And analogous mutual intolerance is also reflected in the echoes of high politics. While the Americans consider rabies to be “a great test of the Soviet bacteriological war,” the Russians accuse the Chinese of “furiously seeking to prevent a detachment between East and West using rabies” (260) – the agreement that just has been reached at the moment when the most powerful politicians escorted the Soviet delegation to Heathrow. And the Chinese again call the Russians “revisionist rabid dogs” (260).

But is rabies a “disease” or the “world in the mirror” (183), as the passionate virus researcher Dr Hamilton puts it, or is it actually a “picture of the world in miniature” (211), as the novelist Daniel Leverquin puts it? In any case, some significant scenes of rabies in this novel are framed by evocations, allusions, and quotations that give it the additional colour of the English cultural history. Thus, for example, an airport hospital is in such a “chaotic state” that it resembles “Georgian State Home for the insane on Hogarth’s engravings” (297). And as “there is not enough protective clothing”, even in quarantine, we learn that some people are “more equal than the others” (330), as in the last, tenth chapter of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that the delusional, futile cry to avoid the relentlessness of a common human destiny given in the image of “the island of the poet Donne, that does not hear the bells when tolling on the other islands” (329), in disability of the endangered ones to realise that “they are not islands, that Donne’s bells, whenever and wherever they are started, always toll for them as well” (383).<sup>10</sup> Even in the most dramatic moments, as Hilary Lawford, the commander of security, preparing his speech on “Abrupt Preventive Law Against Rabies” while “waiting for someone to do his make up for the show”, he thinks that “it is always the best for the dogs or people to tell the truth in time,” recalling his favourite Churchill, who “did not lie to the British when

<sup>9</sup> George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963, p.114

<sup>10</sup> In his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (“XVII, Meditation”) Donne writes the following: “No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peice of the Continent (...) And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” – John Donne, The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, “XVII, Meditation”, *Devotions upon emergent Occasions*, ed. Charles N. Coffin, The Modern Library, New York, 1952, p. 441. From this text, Hemingway also took the title for his famous novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

he told them that blood, toil, tears and sweat are waiting for them.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, the horror of the image of a dying airport evokes the words that Dr Johnson wrote while referring to Scotland: “The best that can be said for Scotland is that God created it with some purpose, but this can also be said for hell” (441).

It is also characteristic that Pekić’s Serbian text is sometimes permeated not only with some English phrase, such as “out of place” (58), but also with linguistic turnovers suggesting that it is a literal translation of the English original. In numerous places, the English word “damn” or “damned”, literally translated as “cursed” (“bloody”), has been used in a way that reminds us more to its use in English than in Serbian: “damn good joke” (27), “Damn awkward” (40), “This is England, isn’t it? It’s not damn Egypt” (57), “damn selfless” (82), “damn son of a bitch” (127). Perhaps the use of the term “the first minister” (310, 492, 506) instead of “prime minister” has a similar connotation, although this is sometimes heard in our country today as well. But it is especially interesting that Pekić, known as an extremely sophisticated gentleman, feels that the Serbian language has not been good enough for curses, so he literally translates some vulgar English words such as “motherfucker” (“fucker of the mother” – 377). The meaning of the word is “bastard”, but, of course, such a translation would not actually be the vulgar Serbian equivalent. Along somewhat similar lines, Lawford’s response to Leverquin’s remark that the whole world is “reunited” in the care of Heathrow is characteristic: “My arse is united” (259). And this is again a literal translation of the English vulgarism “my arse” meaning “hell (is united)”. But in such a translation the vulgar tone is lost again. Is it in such and many other cases, the matter of interference of a foreign language, such as, for example, we find in Miloš Crnjanski’s *Novel about London*, or, more likely, it is Pekić’s deliberate colouring the text in the English coloratura? And how common is such interference in our country today?

It seems as if in the linguistic meaning *Rabies* in this respect is a sign of mockery and unfulfilled expectations, as it is true of everything else in that novel. Thus, for example, the basic element of the plot – the appearance of the new mutant viruses of canine rabies at Heathrow with Mother Teresa – initially seems to be the result of the bite of a rabid dog at the Monastery of “The Heart of Jesus” in Lagos, Nigeria. However, it is soon turned out that there are no rabid dogs there, that Mother Teresa, in fact, was bitten by a puppy, which was smuggled by a carefree grandson of an American archaeologist in his backpack onto

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<sup>11</sup> In his famous speech on May 13, 1940, Churchill said, among other things: “I have nothing to offer except blood, toil, tears and sweat”. Those words were recorded in an official report on the work of the English Parliament. (*Hansard*, May 13, 1940, col. 1502).

the plane. As, in the end, regardless of the official statements that everything is “under control” (255 etc.), it is shown that rabies is ravaging more and more of the airport, that people in quarantine fight with each other in increasingly shameless ways, so that in the end, they would all be killed by solidarity and joint action by the United Nations – all except for the mindless Gabriel who, though immune to rabies, was able to take out Leverquin’s diary and the manuscript of his novel through the sewer.

Finally, the discovery of the serum against the new rabies virus is also a sign of betrayed expectations. That serum, firstly given to Dr John Hamilton and his colleague, Dr Coro Deveroux, gives the giant strength and unprecedented bliss of a loving experience, but also opens the eyes of John Hamilton that canine rabies at the airport is a sign of the nature of human civilisation and history: “We have exhausted all the sources. (...) Contaminated the earth. (...) We treated it like highway-men” (519). In short, rabies is, in fact, “what we did to ourselves, our biological chance, our history, our lives and our goals” (519). However, the final twist shows that this effective serum transforms John Hamilton and Coro Deveroux, into savages chasing each other with a fire axe and a pulled off iron rod in some kind of new, or perhaps ancient, rage.

And it is strange considering the fact that a German scientist was working on the serum, appearing under various names: as Siegfried Stadler while performing experiments in Auschwitz on Jews for genetic changes in order to create the “übermenscher”, like Friedrich Lieberman as a principal investigator at an English institute, namely Frederick Lohman as a serum seeker against the new rabies virus at Heathrow Airport. Thus, the foolish fury of science found itself in the same category with the fury of history, politics, and high civilisation. In short, and this is the basic metaphorical point of *Rabies*, “the virus is the most perfect creature in the universe” (11), viruses and bacilli of already conquered diseases always show “symptoms of regeneration in new biochemical characteristics” (143), like any other evil, the viruses will also outwit every civilisation, for virus is “born to die only when left alone, when there are no more deaths they could live on” (14).

Is it at the same time a sign of Pekić’s deep disappointment in civilisation, especially in English civilisation, after his youthful experiences in the Balkans? Or is it just a thought of “possibility”, but not the “reality,” of such a disappointment? In addition, *Rabies* also speaks in some kind of muffled language that is not superficially apparent – a language of deep compassion with the writer who would like to be a mere witness, with a police officer who would like to bring order, with a scientist who passionately searches for his truth, even with those wretches and misers starting from a German frustrated petty cash clerk

to a Bulgarian pickpocket and Lebanese transferor of travellers from one zone to the other. And this is the language of compassion for all who, in the widespread misfortune of human fate – and what else – are seeking for some personal meaning, even if it was just a pickpocket's profit.

Pekić's next negative utopia, entitled *1999*, presents an “anthropological tale” about the history of mankind as the “hellish delusion” of a “meaningless civilisation”.<sup>12</sup> Is this novel a sequel or antipode of *Rabies*? Published for the first time in the jubilee of Orwell's *1984*, it again grapples with the destiny of the civilisation, but not in the context of an external, biological triumph of a virus, but in the context of the curse that the human race carries within itself, the curse presented also in several variants of negative utopias in the twentieth-century European and American literature. It is no coincidence, of course, that *1999* is dedicated to “The Memory of George Orwell”, nor does it in its introductory part establish a dialogue with Orwell as a visionary of the total mechanical establishment of the world and police terror in the future. The next chapter is dedicated to Ray Bradbury, famous American writer of science fiction, who, among other things, describes in his novel *Fahrenheit 451* upside-down worlds that see the greatest danger in the books, so his “fire-fighters” go from house to house and douse books and their owners with kerosene in order to then burn them. And Pekić's novel begins the dialogue with Alexander Solzhenitsyn as a painter of Soviet concentration camps which look idyllic compared to the robotic future of humanity. In the end, the story is completed by summoning Aldous Huxley as the prophet of a new society of completely manipulated human “happiness”. Thus, unlike *Rabies*, in its basic conception, the novel *1999* was conceived and elaborated in a much wider context of the European and American literary tradition, and its connection with Orwell, Bradbury, Solzhenitsyn, Huxley and the other writers is indicated in the context of some starting points and conclusions.

The robotic future of the world is set in the novel *1999* several million years after the world's nuclear destruction. On the one hand, we are confronted in the story, with Robot's thinking about the human soul, which “had no other usable value than to make, as it seems, human life difficult to live” (244), that is, “it was an obstacle for a man to become a robot” (245).<sup>13</sup> And on the other hand, Arno, as the Last Man who refused to be programmed, and as an amateur archaeologist, feels

<sup>12</sup> Borislav Pekić, *1999*, Belgrade, 2001, p.201. Further quotations from this book include page numbers in parentheses.

<sup>13</sup> This chapter was later revised, given from a more radical fictional perspective in 2999, and published under the title “The Rays of the New Jerusalem: 2999” in the prose collection *New Jerusalem: The Gothic Chronicle* (1988)

the bliss of warmth touching the mole, dreaming of the Gulag Archipelago as his New Jerusalem, in which barbed wires take on human characteristics and moles, rats, lice and fleas become the “enchantments of the extinct nature” (127). At its core, therefore, the novel rests upon the philosophical contrast between total robotic certainties with human uncertainties as the inexorable price of freedom. Already in the prologue, the protagonist and the last man Arno informs us that he is human because he knows “what uncertainty is” (7), because he enjoys all the magic of life, which, both in the Orwellian police state and in Huxley’s manipulated world, has been eliminated: he enjoys in the “beauty of expectation”, in the “intoxication of anxiety”, in the “magic of ignorance” (11). The chapter on Ray Bradbury entitled “The Golden End”, which implies, of course, not only the beautiful and famous landscape, whose description is taken from Orwell, but also the end of that beauty in the world of maternities in which the disaster is pure gold for an old man. A disaster is, in the broadest sense, also the best solution for the failed experiment as the human race is, for the “early men” have always “been shooting with slings or their more perfect type – atomic bombs” (251).

However, at the end of the novel *1999*, it turns out that the robotic world came into the existence at the end of the twentieth century, though nobody knew it. In those far distant times, the captain of the US Missile Unit, Anderson, knew well “how much exercise it takes to destroy the world completely” (430), but he has not fully reached the true robotic nature yet, so he makes a human gesture when he needs to start the mechanism to destroy the world. Unlike Huxley’s Einstein in the monkey cages in the novel *Monkey and the Essence* (1949), which easily press “relevant” buttons for the destruction, he gets an epileptic seizure, strength failed him, he cramps and falls onto the floor. And when he awakens afterwards in a military madhouse, he will be happy: “As soon as there is a madhouse, there is a world” (476). It seems as if he had not yet been sufficiently programmed for his task.

##### 5. “GOTHIC STORIES”: THE NEW JERUSALEM (1988)

One could say, however, that Pekić achieves the climax of the absurd in the tradition of negative utopias in his “Gothic Chronicle” “The Ray of New Jerusalem, 2999” which is in fact a revised chapter of the story of the Gulag Archipelago from the novel *1999*. That revision is again marked as Pekić’s imaginative dialogue with his own prison experience, especially with the days he spent in the cellar as a special punishment, which he later described in the chapter “My Life with the Rats” in the third volume of the novel, “*The Years the Locusts Have*

*Devoured*".<sup>14</sup> In that autobiographical book, Pekić remembers his jail days in the cellar and points out that "between the frozen walls of that awfully cold room", among the rats, the prisoner could have lived "like a mole in the dark" if there was not a single "flickering bulb".<sup>15</sup> At the same time, in those memories of his, Pekić puts a "metal kibble" into the emblem of that prison institution, as a symbol of something that in "the best way expresses", its "*soul*".<sup>16</sup> Finally, in these considerations, Pekić also mentions that in his book *1999*, imagining the archaeological discovery of Gulag, "among all prisoner's artefacts kibble was assigned the most representative role".<sup>17</sup> In his revising the "Gothic Chronicle" – the Gothic, probably by invocation of some distant historical "ghosts" such as concentration camps from a very distant perspective – the narrator speaks of these "ghosts" which become ideals. Namely, the strictly scientific, rational reasoning expounds the interpretation of the epochal discovery of the remains of the Gulag Archipelago excavated in the ice cave of New Jerusalem, as a testimony that those camps represented a paradise on earth. Don't the skeletons of rats and moles testify to that "deep in the pelvic girdle of a man, clung tightly to each other"?<sup>18</sup> – is it not the obvious evidence of "boundless trust and mutual interdependence" of humans and animals (155). For if the people of that icy civilisation were "dying with beasts, why all the former and the next ones despised, chased them," if "with the ugliest specimens of the fauna, they slept, ate, fraternised, and surely dreamed their dreams, what they must had been like towards each other?" (155-156). For the scientist who thinks of these "three tenderly, lovingly intertwined skeletons, creatures who have grown into a scene of perfect harmony" remain his "most precious archaeological memory, a golden seal on the story of my scientific life" (156), and hence his "hope that we will one day be living with rats again." (157)

And aren't all the other aspects of life in the Gulag Archipelago in that "Gothic story" clear evidence of a concentration camp as an ideal human community? Aren't "barbed wire fences" undoubtedly "symbols of an unbreakable mental community", and "mass graves" are a deeply-moving scene of "longing to take the happy commune even to death" (156). Even the only preserved record on which the scientist spent several years to translate – "It will be sent to the cellar

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<sup>14</sup> "My Life with the Rats" *The Years the Locusts have Devoured: memories from prison or anthropopoeia* (1948-1954), III, Solaris, Novi Sad, 2004, p. 404-416.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 405

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.406

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> "The Rays of New Jerusalem, 2999", *New Jerusalem-Gothic Chronicle*, Selected Works, Volume 1, Solaris, Novi Sad, 2001, p.155. Further quotes from this narrative give page numbers in parentheses according to this edition.

for fourteen days” – is interpreted in a similar way. It was allegedly a kind of “reward” because it would enable the awardee to “enjoy the exclusive society of rats”, which, after all, was “his natural right” (162). However, given the “scarcity in rats, companionship with them could only be accomplished in shifts” (163), as in Pekić’s memories his prison experience in the cellar was also set in shifts, again at “relatively short” intervals from “seven to fourteen days”.<sup>19</sup> “In short, thanks to the high sense of justice”, “in New Jerusalem, everyone had their own moment with the rats” (164). So, New Jerusalem is the “Kingdom of God”, the Gulag is the “paradise” (165), the “Promised Land”, Zek is the “full-fledged member of the Gulag civilisation”, the PCIA – “probably the acronym of cult meaning”, the Good Demon (166) and so on.

This “noble commune of a man and a rat” (168) is also glorified in its ideal relation to nature, with which is achieved a “powerful degree of unity”, so that one often “sleeps under a clear sky”, and even when Zek is in the shelter where “everything is leaking,” “snow kisses people with its icy kisses, nature enters freely to meet people who do not hate and reject it” (172). In such harmony with nature, Zek’s spiritual culture was “superfluous because his body self-integrated to the image of the salamander, whose natural lifestyle he imitated”, and therefore there is probably no evidence that he “enjoyed” it (174). As for the healthy diet, it was “Puritan”, with “an evident effort the community made to eat as little as possible” (180), and many “for days tried to avoid eating in order to reach the astral state” (181). The family was superfluous because according to the programme they followed they lived together and did everything at the same time: “Sleep, wake, work, rest, in short – live, in company, accompanied” (185), with only few offenders, so-called “guards, who were “sent to temporary strict privacy and severe material comfort...” “for the purpose of rehabilitation” (186). Finally, the conclusion points out that, “the Gulag civilisation model, when understood, will help us to resolve most of the troubles that beset us” (190).

And what does it all mean? That only a camp-like world that is set upside down, the greatest defeat of the present, can become the ideal of the future? Or that the future will always misinterpret the past, that is, Solzhenitsyn was right when saying in the Gulag Archipelago that one day “the Archipelago, its air, the bones of its inhabitants, frozen in ice crystals” would be “discovered by our offspring like some incredible salamanders,” as stated in the motto of this story (155)? Or is it a testimony to the utter unreliability of all human interpretations, from the media to the supreme science and philosophy? Or just an example of how in the art of words paradox can be brought to complete

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<sup>19</sup> “My Life with the Rats”, *The Years the Locusts have Devoured* III, p. 406.

absurdity? Or, finally, just another “joke” in the spirit of negative utopias, which has been so abundant in the English literature tradition, from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) to Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell’s *1984* (1949)? And is it not exactly Pekić’s negative utopia 1999 an “anthropological story” about the history of mankind as the “hellish delusion” of a “senseless civilisation”,<sup>20</sup> published in 1984, and dedicated to “The Memories of George Orwell”? Or is it, after all, a call to a crazy world to return to some kind of normality, even if that call was a frantic voice crying out of the desert?

Finally, in the spirit of the English literary tradition, a short story was also written “The Imprint of a Heart on the Wall”, as some kind of a “Gothic story” about supernatural phenomena, but told both literally and in a figurative sense as a story of a “witch hunt”. The main character, John Blacksmith, born at the beginning of the seventeenth century, reveals in his early childhood his divine gift to recognise witches, to see black cats in some old women or young girls with brooms between their legs. Thanks to this God’s grace – for which he does not feel particularly responsible, but as an authentic informant, nourishes it as a kind of moral obligation – he frees the terrestrial world of many evils the witches inflict on him, in many cities and towns, and on many occasions and especially at the time of the English Revolution. Until he frees that world from his mother as well, astonishing his fellow citizens with his impartiality, only to discover in the end that he himself is a warlock. Numerous details of the “Gothic story”, the presence of the extra-terrestrial world, even when it comes to competition in detecting the witches by various methods, emphasise the parabolic character of storytelling and open up various possibilities of police recognition of non-existent evil that was not unknown life experience for Pekić as a victim. It is interesting in this regard that in his memory of his trial and the other members of SDYYs, Pekić mentions that Hobbes did not believe that the “magic” of witches was “some kind of real power”, but nevertheless considered that they were justly punished for “their belief that they can do the misdeeds and their intentions to do them”.<sup>21</sup> In an analogous sense the verdict to the members of SDYY, “according to its own quotations”, as Pekić said, did not believe “in our evil power because of the objective inability to execute the criminal offences outlined by the programme, but nevertheless sentenced us”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, that “if in the place of a judge and dogma follower, Elezovi, was

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<sup>20</sup> Borislav Pekić, 1999, Belgrade, 2001, p.202

<sup>21</sup> “Magnificent Witches on the Flying Wings,” *The Years that Locusts have Devoured II*, p. 372

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

sitting a philosopher and a sceptic follower ‘Thomas Hobbes’ it would have been the same”.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

In literary terms, of course, Pekić’s intimate, life-long companionship with the English culture was fruitfully overshadowed by his own experience and by Serbian culture. *Letters from Abroad*, as well as the *A Sentimental History of the British Empire*, are marked by sparkling dialogue of this kind, often with various universal philosophical and political associations in the subtext. Some of the “Gothic stories” in *New Jerusalem* – such as “The Imprint of a Heart on the Wall” – reveals how it is possible to write parables about the modern world and your own experience in the tradition of an old English literary form. Pekić’s negative utopias, novels and stories – such as *Rabies*, 1999, “The Rays of the New Jerusalem” – testify to the fruitful intertwining of his life experience with imaginative adventures inspired, among other things, by English literary sources. Is this lively presence of English culture in his work actually partly due to the fact that Pekić actually lived in England in “immigrant deafness”?<sup>24</sup> He was, almost exclusively, socialising with “our” people, as his acquaintances say in private conversations, his knowledge of English was much more passive than active, and from the English people, he got to know some of the Slavists a little more directly, such as his translator Bernard Johnson (Lecturer of Russian at London School of Economics) and Celia Hawkesworth (Lecturer of Serbo-Croatian language at the School of Slavic and Eastern European Studies at the University of London). Of course, books, press and television were as much Pekić’s obsession as they were inexhaustible mines for learning about English culture, as can be seen in his works, as well as through the instructions given on the careful storing of the *Guardian* and *Observer*, on handling the TV set which he gave to those to whom he left his apartment while he was away.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, in his literary fertile loneliness, Pekić deeply felt the high cost of living abroad. Thus, he speaks in his essay “Return from Abroad to a Foreign Country” (1987) about the philosophical concept of “exile, alienation and non-belonging” as “the only real way of human existence”, but at the same time points out that in that “space of general, compulsory (...) alienation there are zones in which it is being voluntarily intensified,” implying historical, political and economic migrations:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Božo Koprivica, “Megalos Mastors”, *The Others on Pekić*, p.168

<sup>25</sup> See Predrag Palavestra. “The Urn on a Bookshelf”, *The Others on Pekić*, p.

“When leaving the country, roots are pulled out from it, the ones which connect us to the origin, the native soil, its history and destiny. In the other world they do not find adequate food and wither. You try to grow other roots. But they are false, artificial. These are pseudo-roots of alibis. Roots for the occasion. It satiates but does not feed us. Meanwhile the old roots are rotting. (...) Oh, we can physically return, live in our country for a long time and even die, but nothing will be as it was before. Old roots cannot be restored, new ones cannot be grown.”<sup>26</sup>

Hence for the returnees from abroad to their own country, “if they do not return in the coffin”, await “unexpected and painful” but “natural difficulties”,<sup>27</sup> because they know that they no longer belong to their former world, a kind of misunderstanding they have imposed on themselves. The autobiographically intoned conversation of a returnee with his old friend in Belgrade in the story “The Golden Age Player” is characteristic in this respect. When asked why he returned, the returnee said, “Once you must.” On the remark that “living here is ugly”, the returnee again tries to explain in vain the inevitability and sadness of his return: “But one lives. I did not live.”<sup>28</sup> And this shows that Pekić was “in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, a saint”<sup>29</sup> – a patriot who loved his country as much as the truth about it.

Translated from Serbian by

*Ljubica JANKOV*

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<sup>26</sup> *Collected Letters from Abroad*, p. 163-164

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.128

<sup>28</sup> *New Jerusalem*, p.128

<sup>29</sup> W.H. Auden, “in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint”, “The Unknown Citizen”, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, p.146

IVAN NEGRIŠORAC

## **THE MATICA SRPSKA AND THE LITERATURE OF OLD DUBROVNIK: BETWEEN THE SERBIAN NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING AND THE CROATIAN PASSION FOR POSSESSING**

If we want to see more clearly the nature of old Dubrovnik and its literary and cultural peculiarities, it would be very necessary to listen to what reliable scholarly knowledge historians have come to, and how the citizens of Dubrovnik saw themselves and their relations with the Serbs and Croats. Only on the basis of such indisputable knowledge should we build our picture of the entire problem we are talking about, and even build a possible agreement and better mutual understanding, and thus a better future for both peoples – Serbian and Croatian. That future could be built only in some kind of future Europe that will not renounce the principles of dialogue, will not solve the problems in the Balkans by violence, and will not encourage small nations to settle accounts to the last drop of blood. I believe that such hopes are not deprived of a serious foundation and that we should actively work in accordance with such peaceful and civilized goals.

### **TWELVE THESES ON THE PECULIARITIES OF OLD DUBROVNIK**

According to all the historiographical knowledge acquired up to our time, we could, among other things, compose a picture of what the old citizens of Dubrovnik knew, thought and felt about themselves, as well as how they spoke, wrote and acted when they talked about themselves and their city. Their opinion is certainly compulsory for all those who seriously want to deal with this exceptional city, its history and culture, and especially binding for those who would quite intrusively and rudely

want to resolve the problem of the nationality of the old citizens of Dubrovnik in accordance with the beliefs and attitudes of later times. With this approach, with sufficiently precise and meticulous research and the scholarly knowledge that can be obtained, the reconstruction of the original attitude of the old citizens of Dubrovnik in terms of their self-understanding is not something that should produce great cognitive difficulties. Summarizing all relevant historiographical knowledge, we could express the key insights within twelve constitutive theses.

1. The old citizens of Dubrovnik are descended from the Roman and Slavic population, which means that during the unification of the two settlements – Byzantine Ragusa and Slavic Dubrovnik, starting from the seventh century AD, a common city began to develop, thus creating a mixture of the Latin, Greek and Slavic ethnic substrata.

2. The development of old Dubrovnik went in the direction of the increasing and obvious domination of Slavic elements, which is a process that was mostly completed by the end of the thirteenth century, but the awareness of the participation of Romance and Greek ethnicity remained an important and lasting factor in the culture of memory of old Dubrovnik.

3. In that development, old Dubrovnik was ethnically, demographically, socially, economically and in all other aspects of real, everyday life directed toward the continental area inhabited by the Serbs, and mostly to the nearest areas of Zahumlje and Travunia. Therefore, in the process of Slavicisation of the city, the accepted speech of everyday communication became the Old Serbian vernacular, with the dialectological basis of the Eastern Herzegovinian dialect and the Shtokavian Ijekavica as a supradialect. By the way, we should recall the fact, which was precisely described by Pavle Ivić in the book *Serbian People and Their Language* (1971), that the Croats spoke Shtokavian Ijekavica only in the areas where they lived together with the Serbs, i.e. where they accepted such a dialectical system from the Serbs, or where the rebaptising of the Serbs first made them Catholics, or before that Uniates, and then much, much later, also national Croats.

4. The strong economic development of old Dubrovnik, from the '80s of the twelfth until the middle of the fifteenth century, was essentially connected with the strengthening of the Serbian state under the ruling line of the Nemanjić dynasty, and then their successors on the Serbian throne – from Prince Lazar and despot Stefan Lazarević to the ruling house of the Branković family. Good relations with the state of Bosnia (from Ban Kulin, through Ban Stjepan II and King Tvrtko I Kotromanić, to Duke Stjepan Vukčić Kosača and the regional ruler Radoslav Pavlović), as well as Zeta and its ruling houses (after Jovan Vladimir, there were also the Vojislavljević, Nemanjić, Balšićs and Crnojević

families). The progress of Dubrovnik lasted for some time after the collapse of these countries in the fifteenth century, but the earthquake in 1667 forever interrupted its further development and growth. In the time after the earthquake, there was no longer a strong and benevolent Serbian state to cooperate with to achieve new progress and the rise of development capacities of this specific city-state, so Dubrovnik was on a downward path, failing to solve many of the growing economic, social and political problems. Valuable Serbian historians, otherwise the citizens of Dubrovnik, convincingly testify to how good these relations were the condition for the progress of old Dubrovnik, who say that Dubrovnik paid an annual tax to the Serbian rulers for a long time, which amounted to 1,000 perpers (i.e. silver coins) in the beginning, and 2,000 perpers since the time of King Uroš (who ruled from 1243 to 1276); when the Turks began to collect that annual tax, it amounted to 1,000 ducats (i.e. gold coins) in 1442, 1,500 in 1458, and 12,500 ducats in 1484. This highest amount was stabilized until the final collapse of the Republic, and it did not decrease even when it became obvious that Dubrovnik starting in the seventeenth century was heading towards its own downfall.

5. The social structure of old Dubrovnik was strongly renewed, primarily from the Herzegovinian hinterland, that is from the Serbian ethnic areas. In that way, the city always had enough labour at its disposal, and the lower social strata was successfully and repeatedly strengthened, which enabled the social strength of the Dubrovnik Republic: not only the stability of the nobility as the ruling class, but also the security of the citizens, and optimistic projection connected to the possibility of social improvement of individuals until, under certain circumstances, they acquired aristocratic status. Without the Serbs in the hinterland, these forms of social mobility and the revitalization of Dubrovnik could not exist, so Dubrovnik society would not have been able to achieve such a dynamic and strong development in the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.

6. The strengthening of the city of Dubrovnik also stimulated the attempts to make the city as politically emancipated as possible in relation to those countries (Byzantium, Venice, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, the Austrian Empire) under whose authority it was under the state law. The Serbian state never conquered Dubrovnik and did not keep it in obedience but, respecting its autonomy, guaranteed its special status through imperial charters and concluded cooperation agreements with it. From the third and fourth decades of the fourteenth century, at the time of the greatest power of the Serbian state and its king, then Emperor Dušan, Dubrovnik finally stabilized its political system according to

which only nobles participated in the management of the city. This form of the aristocratic republic was to last until its collapse in 1808 when Napoleon abolished the Republic of Dubrovnik as part of his conquests.

7. The old citizens of Dubrovnik spoke Ijekavian Shtokavica, but in their poetic work and verse speech, they were, in accordance with the understanding of their own identity, able to build a kind of Slavic *koiné*, lingua communis, i.e. a common language of a wider Slavic area. Therefore, they more or less introduced obvious Ikavian forms into the language of their poetry, and in that way mixed a distinctly Serbian (Shtokavian Ijekavica) and a distinctly Croatian (Chakavian Ikavica) dialectical basis. The old citizens of Dubrovnik had a somewhat similar gesture in the domain of the use of the writing system. Primarily writing and publishing books in Croatian Latin, they were also occasionally accustomed to use the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet (for example, *the Dubrovnik Prayer Book, Libar of many reasons*, etc.), so such cultural crossings naturally arose from their wider Slavic self-consciousness. Such stylistic and cultural factors are understood as a kind of gesture of Slavic solidarity, and an expression of understanding and support for “the sons of the soil”, i.e. the Slavs, Sclaveni, as much the Serbs as the Croats, because the people of Dubrovnik could always get along well with both nations.

8. The old citizens of Dubrovnik and their writers developed their literary and poetic system in full harmony with the poetics of Humanism, the Renaissance and Baroque, and later the Enlightenment, which means that the basic patterns of the literature of the Western European cultural space were nurtured. The centre of cultural influences to which the people of Dubrovnik aspired was Italy, and somewhat more broadly the circle of Romance literature, but with them, it was also adopted the image of the unity of European traditions that go back to the roots of Greek and Roman antiquity. At the same time, this means that the culture of old Dubrovnik (apart from the language most often called Slavic, Illyrian, often Serbian, and very rarely Croatian) was nurtured in Latin and Italian, according to which they realized humanistic ideals as an essential expression of all European cultural and educational traditions.

The importance of Italian literature and culture was expressed at the level of the entire cultural and poetic system to which the people of Dubrovnik essentially aspired, so cultural unity with Italy was an undeniable fact important not only for Dubrovnik but for the entire eastern Adriatic coast, as well as for a significant part of the European cultural space in the renaissance and baroque eras. Within the Western literary and poetic order, the Croats were certainly an interesting and important landmark for the old citizens of Dubrovnik with their tradition,

but it all came down to a few prominent artists from northern Dalmatia with whom they performed within a common understanding of Slavic cultural identity. As far as Croatian writers are concerned, this was a movement shaped by several important creators from the cities north of Dubrovnik: Marko Marulić in Split, Hanibal Lucić and Petar Hektorović on Hvar, Petar Zoranić and Brno Krnarutić in Zadar and others. With these writers, undoubtedly Croatian, the people of Dubrovnik tried to build a type of Slavic cultural pattern that speaks of our people, of the sons of the land and they did so in a language that was well understood by the broad strata of the South Slavs, but in forms and styles that were used in developed, western, Romance cultures, primarily in Italy.

9. Through ties with the Croatian writers, the old citizens of Dubrovnik showed signs of full Catholic solidarity within the Slavic community, and within a common cultural commitment that led primarily to the Western cultures as key challenges that the people of Dubrovnik rightly considered acceptable and productive. The society and culture of old Dubrovnik are thoroughly determined by belonging to a quite strong and conservative Catholicism, and that largely means the attitude that the Orthodox population, and especially the newcomers to the city, were mostly seen as Vlachs who should be converted to Catholicism as soon as possible. Thus, the Dubrovnik historian of high aristocratic and Serbian origin – Lujo Vojinović – writes that, immediately after the purchase of the entire area around Ston, including the whole of Pelješac, from Tsar Dušan, the people of Dubrovnik conquered the area in Ston and in Rat surrounding it by the walls and separating the inhabitants from their neighbours, and then forced “the people of Ston and Pelješac to adopt the Catholicism of their new masters”. There were no normal living conditions for the Orthodox people in Dubrovnik until they became Catholics, and the first Orthodox church in the city, despite earlier attempts, began to be built from the end of the eighteenth century and was finished only in 1837. It was the time when Dubrovnik was ruled by the Habsburg Empire, which at that time still held to the spirit of the Edict of Tolerance (1781) of Emperor Joseph II.

10. The entire culture of old Dubrovnik included both material and spiritual aspects related to the development trends from the Middle Ages, Renaissance Humanism, through the Baroque, to the spirit of the Enlightenment. This very last ideological and literary direction had a hard time penetrating the city, which not only systematically preserved the emphasized aristocratic-conservative political situation, but was previously affected by the hard spirit of the counter-reformation, and later by the serious processes of decadence. As much as at the beginning of its development, old Dubrovnik was a city of pronounced vitality and renewed power at the end of its life cycle. It ended with the

abolition of the Republic of Dubrovnik in 1808, and this city already showed serious signs of atrophy and an unwillingness to join the new civil order and the forthcoming processes of civil society. These processes were marked not only by the industrial revolution but also by the liberalization of all social relations, the ideals of “freedom, equality and brotherhood” brought about by the French Revolution, and the literature of romantic sensibility. For all that, Dubrovnik no longer had enough creative strength.

11. During its existence, old Dubrovnik and its creators were an integral part of the entire cultural system nurtured in the Italian countries: educated mainly in Italy (Rome, Florence, Padua, Bologna, Siena, Verona, Venice and other cities), they were directed to the Italian cultural trends, and through this culture to many others, to myriad world writers, theologians, philosophers, historians, scientists, musicians, painters, sculptors, doctors, etc. At the same time, Italian culture implied the systematic nurturing the culture of Latinism, which established the classical, ancient spirit as an integral part of a general humanistic education. The old citizens of Dubrovnik became members of many institutions, academies and associations in Italy, but they also built specific cultural, artistic and educational institutions in Dubrovnik, such as the Dubrovnik Archive, the Archives of the Little Brothers, the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Saviour of the World, the Brotherhood of St. Anthony Abbot and St. Peter, the Brotherhood of St. Anthony, the Dubrovnik Classical Gymnasium, the Academy of the Complex, the Accademia dei Concordi, Academy of the Empty or the Dangubijeh Academy (from Academia Otiosorum Eruditorum or Accademia degli Oziosi Eruditi), etc. By participating in the Italian political and legal, philosophical and scientific, theological and educational, cultural and artistic space, the old citizens of Dubrovnik raised their own civilizational and cultural standards to the level of a worthy most advanced part of Europe in the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

12. Based on all the above, it is quite obvious that the people of Dubrovnik saw themselves as the bearers of Slavic identity, so they did not consider themselves to be Serbs (with whom they were ethnically and linguistically, economically and politically, vitally and communicatively connected) or Croats (with whom they were associated with Catholicism and the type of culture whose patterns they jointly took from Italy). Nurturing the awareness of the Slavic ethnic substratum, they were, therefore, nationally quite neutral; more precisely, they defined themselves as Slavic Catholics, and especially insisted on their uniqueness, considering themselves simply citizens of Dubrovnik. Therefore, their primary intention was to build their existential, social and polit-

ical uniqueness, and to nurture the patterns of Italian culture in a form completely adapted to their Dubrovnik, and even more broadly observing Slavic ambience.

That Dubrovnik Slavic ambience of theirs was ethnically, linguistically, economically, politically, and socially very close to the Serbs, and religiously, literary-poetically and culturally close to those Croats who, scattered in Dalmatian, de facto Italian cities, were fighting for some kind of pattern of national, Croatian culture. The old citizens of Dubrovnik, therefore, did not consider themselves to be either Serbs nor Croats by their Slavism, and they united both the feelings of the Serbs and the Croats because for them both ethnic factors were acceptable as an expression of the spirit of the Slavic "sons of the land". At the same time, the old citizens of Dubrovnik had a highly developed awareness of their own uniqueness: they were citizens of Dubrovnik, i.e. an ethnic mixture of the Romance-Greek population and the Slavs, mostly of Serbian origin, economically, politically, and in terms of destiny, connected with the Serbs, but clearly separated from them by Catholicism, Western literary patterns and the Catholic type of culture. At the level of cultural identity, the old citizens of Dubrovnik developed a special system of affinity according to the Italian models of cultural development, and in that context, they respected Croatian cultural creators and operators, as well as their premonitions and longings. If we truly understand the spirit of old Dubrovnik and if we respect their authenticity and specificity, and if we do not try to completely reshape and falsify its reality, then the most accurate, most argumentative and fair would be to consider old Dubrovnik and its literature a common heritage of the Serbs and the Croats.

## DISPUTABLE QUESTIONS AND HOW TO ANSWER THEM

Trying to resolve the issue of the status of old Dubrovnik in a valid way, well-argued and devoid of nationalist fervour, it is necessary to start from the stated, verified scholarly knowledge. Therefore, it would be good to determine such a circle of indisputable scholarly assumptions in all the conversations between the representatives of the Serbian and the Croatian scientific-cultural community, and then for the participants to agree on what is and what is not cognition they can rely on together. Everything else should be a logical consequence, a reliable conclusion, and an outcome around which there should be no major disputes. If there is an irrational charge in anyone, then one should carefully examine the very roots of such an occurrence, and explain why an everyday person needs to create a problem where it does not even exist. With a little

civilized behaviour and elementary feeling for tolerant dialogue, certain issues could and should be shown in their semblance and falsity, and some others would have to show their real basis if it exists at all. Therefore, it seems to me an extremely polite and constructive approach if I try to answer all the questions which were raised in the letters of those offended and saddened Croatian nationalists who cannot agree to a reasonable thesis about Dubrovnik as a common heritage.

1. To the remark that the Serbian literary historians and anthologists “appropriate the literary works of the Republic of Dubrovnik”, and that they are dealing with Croatian writers when studying the literature of old Dubrovnik, a clear and unambiguous answer is that it is not only Croatian but also Serbian literature. The basis for such an answer is contained in the fact that there are Serbian and Croatian factors of all the ethnic, linguistic and literary identity of old Dubrovnik, so because of that mixture, it is the most accurate to state that this literary-historical phenomenon belongs to both national literatures. At the same time, every member of the Serbian culture should take into account the fact that old Dubrovnik is an important “factor” for the Croats and their experience of their own cultural and literary identity, but every member of the Croatian culture should understand that old Dubrovnik and old people of Dubrovnik are equally important “factors” for the Serbs and for their understanding of ethnic, linguistic and literary identity.

2. To the remark that the Serbian dealing with the literature of old Dubrovnik is only a kind of “promotion of Croatian culture”, the answer is that there is no talk of any kind of promotion or propaganda, and especially not about the promotion of Croatian culture only. Serbian researchers are studying the phenomenon of old Dubrovnik for the sake of the seriousness of scientific research of a relevant, very special regional literature that largely escapes the strictness of national classifications. The researcher who is ready to classify this regional literature completely into only one national corpus expresses a high degree of ignorance of the phenomenon he is declaring, so he risks being declared unknowledgeable by the true experts.

Therefore, both scientific-cultural communities, both the Serbian and the Croatian, should be ready to subject all national prejudices of their researchers to serious critical examination and to refrain from statements that cannot be more seriously grounded for the sake of scientific accuracy. In that sense, to say “Croatian Renaissance writer Don Marin Držić” does not have much justification because it is not entirely true. This claim is not incorrect if such a naming implies the view that the Croatian writer can also be Serbian, but the claim is incorrect if it implies the view that, being the Croatian, he can never be a

Serbian writer. The old citizens of Dubrovnik, for sure, did not identify themselves as the Croats, so this more recent, Croatian identification would have to be used much more cautiously for literary spaces and epochs that were not fully determined nationally. Therefore, it would be much more precise to say “Dubrovnik Renaissance writer Don Marin Držić”, and then it could be explained later why we could and should consider the Dubrovnik corpus as part of the Croatian and/or Serbian literary heritage. There is nothing to complain about such a scientifically completely grounded thought process, but such a procedure is not particularly popular in Croatia, especially with people who are not the best grounded in their profession, so they are ready to say what cannot be seriously defended scientifically.

And how do the Serbian researchers of old Dubrovnik act? They are acting exactly as they should and how it would also be desirable for the Croatian scientific-cultural defenders to perform. That is why Serbian researchers say the most precisely that Marin Držić is a Dubrovnik Renaissance writer, and they will never fail to say that he is a Serb, although he is also the Serbian writer because he is a Dubrovnik writer who writes in Serbian and is important for Serbian literature. Such formulations and interpretive nuances contain quite important, even essential characteristics that can prevent the space of small differences to become a place of great divisions and oppositions, but a place of encounter and better understanding. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Croatian science of literature made a lot of progress in the field of research of coastal Renaissance and Baroque literature, and I will avoid mentioning deserving names on this occasion only so as not to expose those I praise to great and risky inconveniences: whom a Serb can praise (and that -following the appointment so dear to Ante Starčević and all Croatian nationalists – still means to someone in Croatia: ‘Vlach’, ‘Vlach spawn’, ‘impure slave breed’, ‘Slavo-Serbian spawn’, ‘spawn that should be eradicated’, etc.), whom a Serb can praise at all, he must be suspicious and problematic in front of the Croatian, nationally passionate audience! Not wishing any harm to the honourable scientists, I will not mention some truly deserving names. This silence is not, therefore, a consequence of any malice or rudeness, on the contrary!

3. What can be said, however, about the statement that such an explanation, which opens an undoubted perspective of belonging of the literature of old Dubrovnik to both the Serbian and the Croatian corpus, is marked by the Croatian nationalists as “pseudoscientific”? This means nothing more than the irresponsible use of the terms whose meaning has not been clearly understood, but whose valid use has been eliminated by the action of factors exclusively politically motivated and maliciously oriented. Moreover, the pseudo-scientific approach is

characteristic of those ardent Croatian nationalists who used such an attribute to brand Serbian science devoid of political fervour and directed exclusively at reaching irrefutable knowledge about the phenomenon of old Dubrovnik. If therefore, one wonders where there is a “pseudo-scientific” approach, then one should know that it can be on either side, but in terms of explaining the genesis of old Dubrovnik, it is quite certain that “pseudoscience” will primarily be with those who defend strictly an exclusively Croatian character of old Dubrovnik. The whole procedure, therefore, completely resembles that allegorical image in which, in some deceptive situation, a real thief will be the first to exclaim: “Catch the thief!”

4. What else can we say about the ideas and desires for both Renaissance and Baroque literature in the Bay of Kotor, in today's Montenegro, to be also presented as Croatian? Nothing else can be said but that this is also about the claptraps and political ambitions of all Bokelj people (as well as the citizens of Dubrovnik) to be Croatized, despite the fact that Bokelj people never, ever had any Croatian self-consciousness or any reasons to consider themselves as such. Bokelj people are true Serb Catholics, just as the vast majority of the Catholics speaking Serbian language of the Štokavian-Ijekavian dialect who lived on the territory of the Bar Archdiocese. Therefore, in addition to the authority over the Albanian Catholics, this Catholic prelate was also a “Serbian primates”, and his official title was “Archbishop of Bar and the Primates of Serbia”. Isn't that more than a clear indication that not only for the Serbs themselves but also for the Catholic Church, there was undoubtedly a phenomenon of the Serb Catholics? These Serb Catholics must no longer be declared Croats, just as they must not be deprived of the right to declare themselves nationally as they wish.

5. What should be said, then, about the gestures of the Croatian nationalists directed to ridicule the phenomenon of the Serb Catholics and open denial of their existence? Nothing else but that it is all about the aggressiveness of those who would like to carry out the processes of assimilation of the members of another nation, and that without asking anyone for consent, to turn every Catholic of the Štokavian-Ijekavian dialect into a national Croat. The obvious ambitions to gradually conquer the Serbian population, and then their territories, are clear, all with violence without a single shot being fired, and all this is decisively manifested in the act of reaching for the writers who could, at least to some extent, fit in the minimum of the Croatian criteria important for the ceremonies and rituals of the Croatization of both living and dead human souls. The best example of this kind, which clearly indicates the current and future pretensions of Croatian nationalists on the territory of today's Montenegro, is certainly the case of Archbishop

Andrija Zmajević. He is the son of father Nikola – Milutin, grandson of Andrija, great-grandson of Nikola, all originally from Njeguši, from the village of Vrbe, who came down at the beginning of the sixteenth century to Boka, and settled there permanently, first in Kotor, then in Perast. By marrying Catholics, they received the Catholic faith, and Andrija received a good education by studying, among other things, in the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome, he became a priest, and eventually an archbishop, and author of a valuable book of the *Church Chronicle* (1675). In the title of his book, it is pointed out that the author of this work should be recognized as “the teacher and the theologian of philosophy, once the abbot of Perast, now the archbishop of Bar, the holy see of the apostolic governor in Budva, the commissioner of the kingdom of Servia”. Archbishop Andrija Zmajević had a clear awareness of his Serbian origin, as well as the awareness of his Catholicism, but the thesis about his Croatian nationality cannot and must not be developed from that.

In various places within the “promotional” ambitions of the Croatian cultural workers, Andrija Zmajević is quite often referred to as a Croatian writer, and there is only one point that would serve as a stronghold for such a qualification, and that is the only, exclusively Catholic faith, which, as we well know, is not an exclusively Croatian product. On the contrary, Catholicism has always nurtured a high awareness of supranational, universal facts of existence, but Croats regularly justified their religious exclusivism by the need of Catholicism for missionary work in Orthodox, Serbian territories and among the Serb population. In that sense, Croatian nationalists deeply believe that they will be able to carry out a similar endeavour with Andrija Zmajević and then with the entire Boka Kotorska, which was quite successful in the case of Dubrovnik, but which has far fewer objective preconditions to succeed in case of Boka Kotorska. The procedure is the same in all these cases: first carry out the unification or, even better, the direct conversion of the Serb population to the Catholicism; after some time, the sense of ethnic and linguistic identity and elementary solidarity with the Serb population from which one came should be completely neutralized; in the third step, such defections and converts should develop as much antagonism as possible in relation to the members of their former people, so that some of the most prominent Ustasha executioners during the NDH were the former Serbs converted into Catholicism (Vijekoslav Maks Luburić, Miroslav Filipović Majstorović, Ljubo Miloš, Dinko Šakić and the others).

When we talk about the claims of Croatian nationalists in the Bay of Kotor, we should at least look at the results of the census in Montenegro from 2011, and state that in the four municipalities that Croatian

nationalists mostly count on the number of Croats is extremely small: in Herceg Novi there are 2.14%, in Kotor 6.87%, in Budva 0.87%, and only in Tivat are there slightly more – 16.42%. Altogether, there are a total of 4,686 Croats in all of Boka, Grblja and in Budva Paštrovići, so it is obvious that no thesis on the Croatianess of the Bay of Kotor can be built on such a number. There is a lot of ethnic, linguistic and cultural-historical evidence about the Serbness of Boka Kotorska, but I would never make a strict conclusion that Boka is exclusively Serbian, but I would always ask Bokeljs themselves what they think about it. I would do it despite the fact that I know very well how they thought and acted in some crucial historical moments, and we should always keep in mind the simple fact that they have never, ever in their history considered themselves to be Croats.

6. What to say about the claim of the Croatian nationalists that the Serbian literary understanding of old Dubrovnik only conceals the “idea of Greater Serbian hegemony”? First of all, it should be said that this type of conclusion is a consequence of rigid, political and propaganda speech, which is deprived of serious critical and scientific reasoning. There are no scholarly bases for such a conclusion about the presence of the “idea of Greater Serbian hegemony”, there are, however, political bases but they are completely deprived of a real foundation. First of all, in connection with the idea of a Greater Serbia and Great Serbian, following the research of Čedomir Popov (*Greater Serbia: Reality and Myth*, 2007), it should be pointed out that the idea of a Greater Serbia was never neither the basis of the Serbian state politics nor it was the basic setting in the programme of key political parties in the Serbian political life. The idea of a Greater Serbia did exist in the minds of some less important and less influential politicians and ideologues, it was even promoted in the media at different times, but the most interested in this type of narration were those centres of the state, military, political and media power that were hostile to the Serbs, and above all, directed towards the suppression of the Serbs, the Serbian state and Serbian institutions, even from those areas where they had a full historical, cultural, demographic and all other rights. This type of ideological-propaganda phantom called Greater Serbia is quite gladly invoked by the Croatian nationalists because at the very moment of mentioning this political idea, the notion of the certainty of armed threats, fights, wars and conquests is automatically activated. By such actions, also automatically, Serbs are presented as hordes of savages, a bunch of warlike and bloodthirsty primitives, and on the contrary, the character of the Croats is positioned as innocent victims and bearers of the dream of a millennial culture of the Western type. Considering that in reality, it

is significantly different than in propaganda presentations, then for the Matica srpska, and even for the entire Serbian scientific community, there is no alternative but to fight for the historical truth, and to show how it really was historically and how with its methodologically tested procedures, science was able to determine that.

7. What can be said about the language of the old citizens of Dubrovnik, for which the objections from the Croatian side want to say how unfamiliar it is to today's Serbs? First of all, it should be noted that the language of the pre-Vuk Karadžić's epoch, both among the Serbs and the Croats alike, possessed certain communication difficulties to today's average reader from both nations, but they are still not so difficult to overcome. Yes, a certain more careful philological preparation is necessary for reading these texts, whereby in the language of old Dubrovnik writers it is not so much a problem in the phonological or morphological spheres as in the lexical and semantic ones. In that respect, the Croatian readers are in no better position than the Serbian readers. But regardless of the mentioned difficulties, for those who know the history of the Serbian language well, and especially its dialects, reading Dubrovnik writers is not an insurmountable difficulty in the linguistic-structural sense, but it is a source of great linguistic discoveries and poetic pleasures. The language of Dubrovnik writers brilliantly shows how the expressive powers of the Old Serbian vernacular are being enhanced and enriched by meeting Renaissance and Baroque poetics, Catholic spirituality, and Italian (and to a lesser extent Croatian) literature and culture.

8. It should certainly be said that at the time when old Dubrovnik accepted the language from the hinterland, it was not Croatian but Serbian language, the language spoken in the nearest areas of Zahumlje and Travunia. That acceptance of the Štokavian Ijekavica in old Dubrovnik was completed sometime by the end of the thirteenth century, and that was the time when the foundations of the Serbian linguistic, religious, and political identity were already very firmly set. From the fourteenth century, and especially in the later centuries, the conversion of the Serbian population to Catholicism lasted for a long time, and in the fourteenth century, it was carried out in the area from Pelješac to Dubrovnik itself, and then in many other areas. So, when the language of the old citizens of Dubrovnik, Pelješac, and the vernacular from the whole area all the way to the mouth of the Cetina, wants to be declared Croatian, it must be clear to every Croatian philologist that this effort is based on subsequent interventions to translate the Old Serbian population into Catholicism, and then the Old Serbian language was spread more and more among the Catholic population. Appropriate scientific research will have its say on this phenomenon in the future, so

it is not worth wasting the topic on political declarations, either Croatian or Serbian, without any serious cognitive basis.

9. As for the phenomenon of so-called Bosnian Cyrillic (Bosančica), as somewhat specific variants of the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet, should be left to philologists (and this has already been done by Biljana Samardžić for the most part) to present the entire history of this scientific problem, and to be shown when and how, with more than a century ago, with Čiro Truhelk, and within the framework of the Austro-Hungarian imperial concept of Benjamin Kalaj, such an idea was constituted on which the Croatian nationalists want to build their unfounded pretensions onto a part of the Serbian Cyrillic written heritage. It is superfluous to decide and declare oneself politically on these problems as well, but everything should be left to be thoroughly researched scientifically and to come to the most reliable, primarily historical, explanation of the phenomenon itself. It is only interesting that at the time when all cultural and civilized nations are distancing themselves in relation to their own imperial past, the Croatian nationalists openly express their intention to gloat a little on just such an imperial past of some other, great Catholic peoples, and they do so by trying to preserve from such a past those constructions and forgeries that perfectly suit them, the Croats, so today defend those constructions and forgeries as the very truth that must not be further examined and checked. As we no longer live in a society with limited freedom of thought, speech, media, and even scientific work, this attempt to prevent scientific research will certainly fail.

10. What can be said about the distinct, clearly expressed need of the Croatian nationalists to name as Croatian even what was never originally Croatian, but which, due to the certain historical circumstances and common life, eventually became Croatian? Old Dubrovnik was never Croatian, nor did the old citizens of Dubrovnik have any Croatian identification, but that does not prevent Croatian nationalists from simply taking over completely new phenomena from the corpus of Serb Catholics into their own possession, so, with light propaganda effects and delayed re-namings, they achieve the effect of the subsequent registration among the Croats some things that were never Croatian. In principle, the Croatian project of nationalization of the entire Catholic population of the Shtokavian pronunciation has no borders, so in such a brutal and aggressive approach, it will not stop even in the face of clear scientific warnings. In that sense, in the future, we can only expect new forms of aggressive manifestation and the need to conquer human souls and territories.

One of the recent, really drastic examples of this type is the case of the Serbs Karasheviks from the Danube region in the Romanian part of

Banat. According to its linguistic characteristics, this ethnic group is undoubtedly a member of the Serbian people and the bearer of one of the manifestations of the Štokavian-Ekavian supradialect, more precisely the Prizren-Timok dialect. Karashevci are, without a doubt, of Serbian origin, and according to the research of Pavle Ivić, they settled to the territory of today's Romanian part of Banat, most likely in the fifteenth century. Called Krashovan, Karashovans, Karashevci, Serbs Karasheviks, they did not have any Croatian national identification until recently. During the twentieth century, under the influence of the Catholic priests, and special diplomatic initiatives and financial support provided by the independent Republic of Croatia since the 1990s, the identification with the Croatian name began to appear among the Karasheviks, and they began to declare themselves as Croats.

The fact that this is a completely new, created and invented phenomenon is not something that could be worrying in itself. Simply put, the Karashevci realized that such a statement opens up some better, more profitable life perspectives for them, so they decided on those better perspectives with a certain calculation. What can be much more worrying is the fact that according to this case, Croatian nationalists are already preparing for further appearances, mystifications and lies with the thesis that the Croats have always spoken Shtokavian Ekavica, in the far east of that speaking zone. According to the well-known principle that a lie repeated a hundred times becomes true, in a few decades the Croatian national programme will not declare as its primary goal only the effort to turn the entire Shtokavian-Ijekavian area into national Croats but will begin to ruin even the Ekavian space. At first, this may seem extremely frivolous, funny, even grotesque, but over time miracles can be performed with sufficient financial support from the Croatian state, with the thorough action of the Catholic Church, with favourable international political and interstate circumstances, as well as with the further, proverbial passivity of the Serbian scientific, cultural, and political communities. These and similar dangers are the most serious reason why the Serbs must always be vigilant and must be careful not to find themselves again under the rough blows of Croatian nationalist ideology and religious-political practice whose passion for owning people and territories has no cognitive or moral boundaries. The Croatian nationalists have long been waging a sometimes silent, sometimes fierce, but consequentially serious cultural war against the Serbian people. Therefore, it is indeed high time that to this undeclared, but effectively conducted cultural war, we finally begin to respond seriously, scientifically, and in a well-organized manner.

11. What should be said about the claim that Serbian philology with its reconciliation and tolerance, its attitude that the old Dubrovnik

literature belongs to both Serbian and Croatian culture, about the claim of the Croatian nationalists that with such an attitude Serbian science is provoking a series of “new conflicts, new disputes and new interethnic confrontations at this level”? The answer can be quite short and clear: if we leave all these issues to be resolved peacefully in the domain of science and scholarly knowledge, there will be no reasons for any other type of conflict than scientific disputes. If, on the other hand, there is a constant need to introduce these topics into daily political life and to confront them with people who do not know enough about it and need to make it an integral factor of their home-guard mentality, then serious processes of mobilization of overzealous people can occur, those unwilling to listen to the voice of reason, and ready to act criminally.

12. So what is the only acceptable solution to this not at all complicated situation? The only solution is for scientific research to show what the truth of things is and how to think about the problems if we want to build attitudes about cultural and historical phenomena that are rational, verifiable, factually based, and well-argued. This means that it would be good if members of the Croatian scientific and cultural community no longer try to stop the research efforts of their Serbian colleagues and to carefully examine the arguments put forward by the Serbian philologists, so if they have any contribution to a normal, civilized scientific debate, such a conversation is more than welcome. Let us, therefore, use this kind of misunderstanding to rethink everything well, and to use this fact of misunderstanding and confrontation of different opinions on new bases to build new, hopefully, common cognitive, thought and life perspectives.

#### THE MATICA SRPSKA AND THE LITERATURE OF OLD DUBROVNIK

If we respect the presented scientific knowledge and carefully explain all the questions that necessarily arise, we can conclude that claiming that the old citizens of Dubrovnik were Croats is essentially as incorrect as claiming that they were the Serbs. Therefore, from somewhat different ways, and in situations when it would be necessary to declare oneself nationally, the citizens of Dubrovnik could claim either one or the other. When the Republic of Dubrovnik collapsed and when the strongest factors of self-preservation of this city-state disappeared, the question of the nationalization of Dubrovnik inevitably arose. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the basic understanding of the notion of the nation seemed to be that the citizens of Dubrovnik resolutely declared themselves as the Serbs,

followed by the persistent action of the Catholic Church, the Ustasha and communist ideology, and the inability of the Serbian political and intellectual elite to see where these processes lead, made the Croatess of Dubrovnik begin to turn out in the socialist period to be the only politically acceptable attitude established by the state measures. This process of building a new, Croatized Dubrovnik has yet to be described in more historiographical detail. It is an undeniable truth that during the second half of the twentieth century the final integration of Dubrovnik within the Croatian political and cultural corpus took place, but this fact in no way denies the equally undeniable fact that in the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and Baroque, the abolition of the Republic of Dubrovnik in 1808, until the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes / Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the city of Dubrovnik, its inhabitants and its culture were in very close ethnic, linguistic, economic and communication relations with the Serbs in the hinterland, but also with centres of the Serbian state, economy and culture, wherever these centres were located at different times. It is also indisputable that old Dubrovnik was linguistically, communicatively, socially, demographically, economically, and even politically connected primarily with the Serbs, while in religious, cultural, literary, and poetic terms it was much closer to the Croats.

This fact is not and should not be disputable, and the most important Croatian as well as the Serbian historians were fully aware of it. Great philologists and important historians among the citizens of Dubrovnik, such as Milan Rešetar, dum Ivan Stojanović, Luko Zore, Lujo Vojnović, Petar Kolendić, Jorjo Tadić and others, have significantly contributed to the preservation of such respect for Dubrovnik, its history and tradition among the Serbs to our times. However, these findings are not present to a lesser extent in the Croatian historiography, so that, for example, the great Croatian historian Vjekoslav Klajić (1849–1929), in his extensive, five-volume *History of the Croats* (1980; first edition 1899–1911), has very few places for the political, economic and social history of Dubrovnik, and what he writes about Dubrovnik mainly refers to literature, art and culture. Also, another Croatian giant among the historians, Ferdo Šišić (1869–1940), in his *Review of the History of the Croatian People* (1962; previous editions 1916; 1920) gives the history of Dubrovnik a quite small, marginal place within the central course of true Croatian history. The indicated arrangement of the constituent factors of the Croatian history corresponds exactly to what is the truth about things connected to old Dubrovnik, so the approach of V. Klajić and F. Šišić is such that it is based on unadulterated forms of the historical knowledge.

On the contrary, any more explicit Croatocentric statement regarding old Dubrovnik must immediately provoke certain reservations

among experts because they clearly see how much it is a matter of distortion and falsification, i.e. the forgery of historical truth. Of course, one who thinks exclusively politically and nationalistically passionately will not be able to notice the indicated nuances, and the facts themselves are completely unimportant to him: moreover, he is completely ready to utterly hide and reshape them, and to act as if the historical truth does not even exist. The firm Croatian nationalistic passion for the exclusive possession of the right to old Dubrovnik is only an essential expression of the need to obsessively direct the history of the Croats towards the missionary and crusading conquests of Vlach souls and the Slavo-Serbian breed which should be eradicated, or at least turned into obedient, tame Catholic flesh (Ante Starčević). The one who can find in oneself even a little Christian or general humanistic orientation would never wish anyone, any nation in the world, such a sad, cruel fate as their own nationalists intend for their own Croats.

The Matica srpska, and the Serbian scientific community in general, in no form of distortion and falsification, i.e. forging the truth about old Dubrovnik does not want to participate. Therefore, the oldest Serbian cultural institution has not only the right but also the irrevocable obligation to organize serious research on old Dubrovnik and its entire political, legal, linguistic, literary, and cultural heritage. That this is so can be clearly seen in its major scientific and encyclopaedic projects such as the *Serbian Biographical Dictionary*, the *Serbian Encyclopaedia* and the anthological edition *Ten Centuries of Serbian Literature*: these projects present knowledge and values that manifest themselves in various ways as Serbian, but which could never hurt or seriously endanger because they are also Serbian. If, because of the case of old Dubrovnik, the voices of offended and saddened Croatian nationalists appear, be sure that in their ignorance those offended and saddened sincerely experience pain and suffering, but these psychological experiences have no more thorough basis, but are based solely on the passion for the innocuous possession of something that is not only theirs.

Everything that the Matica does is always based on the most reliable scientific knowledge, including, in this case, the literature of old Dubrovnik, which, without any ideological fog, should be seen primarily as a common heritage of the Serbs and the Croats. Therefore, both the Matica srpska and the entire Serbian scientific community are obliged to the phenomenon of Dubrovnik and Dubrovnik literature in terms of at least intensifying the necessary approach to the matter itself. On the one hand, the entire corpus of Dubrovnik Renaissance and Baroque literature as a whole must be preserved within the historical vertical of the Serbian literature. In our time, that entity primarily belongs to the Croatian culture, but based on the knowledge about the genesis of

the phenomenon, the secondary affiliation to the Serbian culture should not be disputable at all. This only means that we do not declare the old citizens of Dubrovnik to be Serbs, but we know that Dubrovnik writers participated in shaping Serbian literature, so, like the citizens of Dubrovnik and Slavs, they are also Serbian writers in that sense.

On the other hand, the citizens of Dubrovnik themselves, within their own family culture of memory, often had a developed awareness of their own origins that bound them to the Serbs from the hinterland of the city, and all this further influenced the experience and expressive qualities of the language derived from the communication communion with the Serbs, as well as from the fact that the largest demographic influx in Dubrovnik is related to the immigration of the Serbs to that city. Thus, by settling the Serbs from the hinterland, these Orthodox people arrived in the Serbian migrations and became the ancestors of some of the greatest Catholic creators that this city gave, and they often self-consciously joined the Serbian ethnic and political community, Serbian literature and culture, and even Serbian institutions: Cvijeta Zuzorić, Ruder Bošković, Sava Vladislavić, Petar Budmani, Matija Ban, Medo Pucić, Luko Zore, dum Ivan Stojanović, Antun Fabris, Milan Rešetar, Ivo and Lujo Vojnović, Petar Kolendić, Jorjo Tadić and others. According to these historical facts, according to the creators of such an origin and to those who for various reasons saw themselves as a part of Serbian literature and culture, Serbian philology cannot and must not remain silent and indifferent. Therefore, all these cases, both those with the status of collective and those with the status of individual affiliation, should be meticulously studied and precisely situated in the cultural framework that really belongs to them.

No one should and must not prevent such research, from which we should all acquire adequate knowledge as lessons and as valid material for possible civilized conversations. If we leave science to calmly consider all the phenomena that can cause many divisions, then there is hope that one day we will reach a sufficient amount of knowledge so that we can pose and solve the problem in the most rational and tolerant way. Therefore, any attempt to politicize a serious, not at all simple, but still quite solvable issue should be left completely aside as an example of an inadequate and harmful approach. Therefore, I would ask all oversensitive and indignant Croats to first examine the real basis for their hypersensitivity and resentment, so when they rationally, based on scientific knowledge, determine that there are no serious reasons for such a thing, then they should give up the phantoms they have filled their own conscience with.

If that really happens, and if a critical type of historiographical consciousness substantiates nationally self-conscious Croats, then a

historic agreement between the two nations could indeed follow. Every man of full mental concentration could only wish for such an outcome, so it would be worth the effort. Above all, outraged Croatian nationalists are on the move to seriously search their own consciousness and conscience. In that domain of common tasks, the Serbs have come a long way and done a lot of their work. Now we can calmly wait for the Croats to arrive if they care at all about the cultural and civilized dialogue with the Serbs. It won't take long, so we'll see if we've done anything in this enterprise!

Translated from Serbian by  
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TIHOMIR BRAJOVIĆ

## A SHORT HISTORY OF ABUNDANCE

### A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN NOVEL

The term “contemporary Serbian novel”, which is used in the subtitle of this essay, refers quite precisely to novelistic works written in the Serbian literary language and published in the last two decades, i.e. from the end of the eighties of the twentieth century until today, in the interval which in manifold ways, as we have seen in the example of lyric poetry, means discontinuity and change.

As elsewhere, the end of the twentieth century arrived in the Serbian literature as a sign of re-examination of values and a particular kind of identity crisis that arose from a unique set of circumstances, related to non-literary rather than literary factors. The well-known concept of *fin-de-siècle* is seen as a decadent period of disintegration of old systems and the appearance of vague outlines of new systems in an unexpected and quite special light. The global fascination with the change and disappearance of seemingly constant historical and ideological configurations was joined by a unique local and regional experience of, literally speaking, geopolitical or state dissolution and cultural transformation. Although at first glance less dramatic and far-reaching, the poetic consequences of the mentioned circumstances were also very noticeable. Seen in that light, the peculiarity of Serbian literature in this transitional interval is reflected in the fact that the novel became perhaps more dominant than ever before in relation to other fiction genres, thus testifying to the undoubted dominance of narrative megaphilia here and today. The statistics speak for themselves. The usual production of about fifty novels, which for years covered the entire for-

mer Serbo-Croatian language area, has been replaced since the mid-1990s by a twice as large corpus of as many as a hundred, sometimes more titles, published each literary season only in the newly established, not always easy or precisely identifiable Serbian linguistic and cultural space.

And although this obvious increase in the number of printed novels can be explained at least in part by the liberalized, technical and technological modernization as well as simplified publishing conditions, the fact remains that the novelistic muses were specially employed “overtime” at this turbulent time at the turn of the century, when the sound and the fury of unhappy reality often had their sinister, thunderous echo. Therefore, the review of more notable novelistic achievements in the mentioned period is inevitably limited to a panoramic perspective, in other words to a “wide shot” understanding, without a more comprehensive presentation of the authors themselves and a more careful interpretation of his works. In turn, such a perspective may enable the observation of those, tentatively speaking, common, typological features that most often go unnoticed in individual interpretations and studies.

### DEALING WITH THE PAST: A HISTORICAL AND CIVIC-RENEWAL NOVEL

It is certain that quantity does not necessarily imply imaginative and aesthetic abundance, especially not when there is a peculiar “cacophony” which, coming from all sides at the same time, easily obscures the authentic authorial voices of the time. In the last twenty years, almost hand in hand with the already usual number or hyper-production of novel titles, there has been a pronounced and privileged *cognitive interest*. Always suitable to be a kind of poetic laboratory for testing narrative procedures and artistic experiments as well as for expanding genre boundaries, the novel is, as already noted, more than some other forms of artistic representation of reality, subject to concrete or widely understood ideological influences of the famous “spirit of the times”. Even the Serbian novel, that is, the novel written in the Serbian language, has not remained immune to such influences. Moreover, it seems to have responded to the undoubtedly excessive challenges of creation and publication with its own writing (over)abundance, with its distinct narrative megaphilia.

Mainly written out of the need for comprehending a real surge of political and historical events at the end of the century, many achievements in this period testify to a kind of renewal of the *historical novel*, which most often appears in the characteristic form of a *new historical novel*. Encompassing the predominant part of the novel production of the 1990s, but also of the first years of this century, the Serbian novel with

historical interest most often deals with attempts at narrative-fictional thematization of recent national, sometimes supranational history. This (over)abundance of history and shortening of the distance in relation to the presented past is a consequence of the mentioned *cognitive engagement*, which in most *new history novels* is focused on re-examining, changing and re-evaluating recent truths, official facts and beliefs in light of current events and their understanding. Relying partly on the affinities towards the novelistic revaluation of recent history manifested and recognized by readers in the seventies and eighties (Dobrica Čosić *Vreme smrti, Deobe, Vreme zla*; Antonije Isaković *Tren I-III*), and at the same time inheriting invasive writing matrices, characteristic of the *new memoir literature* of the 1980s as the most visible expression of the disappearance of ideological considerations and limitations in the post-Tito era, this type of historiographical narrative often borders on *applied literature* as a literary mode that combines fictional and pragmatic interests, establishing itself as a form of “impure” or hybrid fiction, which means essentially ambivalent literature with fictional aspirations, but also with distinct cognitive-corrective and implicitly compensatory ambitions.

The narrators and/or heroes in these novels are often, by name and biographical features, barely concealed “doubles” of the authors themselves who were personally interested or involved in recent political history (Dobrica Čosić, *Vreme vlasti*, 1995; *Vreme vlasti II*, 2007; Radovan Karadžić, *Čudesna hronika noći*, 2004). The growing, almost as a rule “metastatic” presence of factographic-feuilleton material, which often neglects the style and more complex motivation of characters and disturbs the balance of construction and composition, or delays the adoption of the individual approach in the creation of artistic work, reveals in fact a crucial urge to correct the official knowledge of the not so distant past as the overriding formative interest of this type of novel, even when it is written with distinct artistic ambitions and intentions (Antonije Isaković, *Miran zločin*, 1992; *Gospodar i sluge*, 1996; Vuk Drašković, *Noć đeneralja*, 1994; Žarko Komanin, *Gospod nad vojskama*, 1995; *Ako te zaboravim, moj oče*, 2005; Dragoslav Mihajlović, *Zlotvori*, 1997; Milovan Danojlić, *Oslobodioci i izdajnici*, 1997; *Balada o siromasti*, 2000; Nikola Moravčević, *Albion, albion*, 1994; *Svetlost zapada*, 2003; *Vitez u doba zla*, 2007; etc.) The proliferative practice has produced dozens, maybe hundreds of such novels in the last decade or two, which take fiction as a kind of alibi for a utilitarian address to a not always historiographically informed and literary readership. Even seemingly phlegmatic writers in the historiographic sense of the word, such as Momo Kapor, the coryphaeus of jeans prose and the popular

urban paradigm, did not resist this temptation. Kapor's *Sarajevska trilogija* (*Čuvan adrese; Poslednji let za Sarajevo; Hronika izgubljenog grada*, 2003) is actually the fall of the jovial and culturally tolerant urban spirit that was the hallmark of this writer's work for decades.

A more sublimated and to some extent more indirect form of such reckoning with the past can be found in works that resort to the traditionally recognizable “filtering”, for example in the linguistically archaic reconstruction of 1848 in Vojvodina (Miroslav Josić-Višnjić, *Odbрана i propast Bodroga u sedam burnih godišnjih doba* 1990). It is similar to the implicitly ironic application of universal biblical/Sterian models and patterns in the stylistically and compositionally symmetrical depiction of the repressive aspect of the Broz regime and the post-Broz era (Miroslav Josić-Višnjić, *Svetovno trojstvo* 1995; *Roman bez romana, Dok nas smrt ne rastavi* 2005). The same applies to the “Faulknerian”, polyphonic, somewhat bizarre perspective in depicting the fate and culture of disappearing national enclaves outside the motherland (Jovan Radulović, *Prošao život* 1996; *Od Ognjene do Blage Marije* 2008).

Even writers who have been present on the prose scene for a long time have not resisted the call of new historical themes. These are writers such as Ivan Ivanji (*Balerina i rat* 1993, *Čovek od pepela* 2006, *Staljinova sablja* 2008), but also Dobrilo Nenadić, the author of the cult novel *Dorotej* (1977), who, apart from historical-legendary novels inspired by national history (*Roman o Obiliću* 1990, *Despot i žrtva* 2000, *Sablja grofa Vronskog* 2002, *Pobednici* 2004, *Mrzvolja kneza Bizmarka* 2005, etc.), also found room for a novelized narration about the anti-heroes of the new Balkan wars (*Polarna svetlost* 1995).

Generationally somewhat younger authors have tried to innovate the structure of the new historical novel. Rajko Lukač, for instance, although completely dedicated to historical themes, shows an effort to in some sense refresh historiographical fiction, defining his megaphile works as “collage” or “story for one reader” (*Ljetne sante* 1995, *Božji ugodnici* 1998, *Hroničar* 2005), and similar, more or less successful interventions in style and composition have also been made by Ranko Risojević (*Ivanovo otvaranje* 2000, *Bosanski dželat* 2006, *Simana, Banjalučka trilogija* 2007), Radosav Stojanović (*Divlji kalem* 2002, *Angelus* 2004), Petar Sarić (*Strah od svetlosti* 2005, *Sara* 2008), Ratko Adamović (*Sveti hrast* 1990, *Paganski protokol* 1995, *Tumači gline* 2000), Tihomir Nešić (*Balkanski krst* 1995, *Zadužbina na vetrilu* 2003) and Aleksandar Jugović (*DISHarmonija* 2005, *Tri roga meseca* 2006, *Srpski u sto lekcija* 2008). Separate, in a sense marginal phenomena are the opuses of writers such as Mladen Markov, a long-time novelist and chronicler of the Serbian family and village in the midst of ideological and historical changes (*Ukop oca* 2002, *Teskoba* 2006), then Aleksan-

dar Petrov, who, after notable essayistic and literary-historical work, experimented with the creation of historical-legendary novels (*Kao zlato u vatri* 1998, *Turski Beč* 2000, *Lavlja pećina* 2004), or Miro Vuksanović, epic-poetic lexicologist and guardian of the disappearing world of archaic values through an ambitious, even pretentiously chained form of “alphabetical novels” and similar narrative endeavors (*Daleko bilo* 1995; *Semolj Gora* 2000; *Točilo* 2001; *Kućni krug* 2003; *Semolj zemlja* 2005; *Semolj ljudi* 2008).

The whole separate current, or at least the thematic arm of the Serbian new historical novel, rests, on the other hand, on a thematically and ideologically sophisticated basis, as a rule realized in the narrative of the historical destiny of bourgeoisie as a thwarted and ideologically sacrificed bearer of unfinished modernization of society. The history of the bourgeoisie and its contemporary offshoots is in fact a narratively bifurcated and imaginatively enlivened, in a way ambivalent pattern of comprehensive renewal interest as the urge that is best embodied in its social and cultural-historical paradigm. Announced in the early 1970s by Pekić's *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (1970), and then monumen-tally established in the powerful metafictional orchestration, difficult to reduce to conventional thematic, leitmotif and compositional aspects, of his seven-volume *Zlatno runo* from the 1980s, this direction then produced a variety of performances. They are almost without exception written with a recuperative and at the same time skeptical or pessimistic awareness of the tragedy of historical discontinuity as an involuntary and forced oblivion of the collective being of the nation. The most expressive representatives of this bifurcating current of the civic-renewal novel, i.e. evocative novel, entered the literary scene almost without exception in the seventies and eighties, and in the nineties offered readers some of its most read and most important achievements.

Svetlana Velmar Janković, after *Dorćol* (1984), a novel written in the style of a travel guide, and the noted *Lagum* (1990), published *Bezdrođe* (1995) and *Nigdina* (2000), novels written in a modernized mimetic-realistic manner, with partial reliance on modern literature (Nabokov) and inter-media discourses (photography). These novels cover a wide chronological range from the mid-nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century. Narrating the fate of thwarted reformers such as Prince Mihajlo Obrenović, i.e., the fate of the bourgeoisie in the whirlwind of world and recent regional wars, they, through paradigmatic human destinies, outline a provisional and informal novelistic history of ideas of social modernization and their individual or collective bearers. Even the novelistic-essayistic biography of Karađorđe entitled *Vostanije* (2004) belongs to this direction. It is a book whose

“sinister” protagonist, otherwise a paradigmatic representative of originally rural, pre-modern Serbia, with retrospective fictional treatment becomes a kind of forerunner of thwarted and interrupted modernizing impulses.

Already hinted at in the novel *Prijatelji* (1980), Slobodan Selenić's interest in the issue of the decadence of authentic Serbian bourgeoisie and its dissolution in the conditions of ideological upheavals took on different forms of painting the political, cultural and historical consequences of this pivotal process in the novels *Pismo-glava* (1983), *Očevi i oči* (1985), *Timor Mortis* (1989), *Ubistvo s predumišljajem* (1993). The esteemed playwright and narrator Vida Ognjenović, as well as the Novi Sad-based writer Milica Mićić-Dimovska, gave their contribution to the same thematic complex. Ognjenović wrote a lyrically melancholic and fluidly symbolic family story entitled *Kuća mrtvih mirisa* (1995), as well as the intimate novel drama *Preljubnici* (2006), whose heroine is a total social outsider and an indirect witness to the tragedy of the bourgeoisie. With the biographical fictionalization of one of the half-forgotten female icons of the national cultural heritage, Mićić-Dimovska deals with this topic in the novel *Poslednji zanos Milice Stojadinović Srpskinje* (1996), and with the problematization of the unenviable position of women in the hierarchy of degraded and disappearing bourgeoisie in the last novel *Utočište* (2005), which can be read as an echo of the author's gynocentric interests, already made known in the early *Priče o ženi* (1972). Over time, this trend of cultural renewal was joined by authors who are not professional writers (Strahinja Kastratović: *Klen na vrbovom prutu* 2000, *Pola dana hoda do smrti* 2003, *Ljubav opasana tugom* 2005).

Starting with similar civic and bourgeois issues in the regional, historically long-marked Kosovo and Old Serbian framework (*Vlasnici bivše sreće*, 1989), Danilo Nikolić published a number of intriguing novels in the 1990s (*Kraljica zabave* 1995, *Fajront u Grgetegu* 1998, *Foto-keramika gospodina Cebalovića* 2000, *Jesenja svila* 2001, *Velika prazna reka* 2003, *Melihat iz glog* 2005), which most often successfully combine the local and the universal with poetic actuality in the form of a dynamically fragmentary and media-typographically diverse or complex mosaic narrative. Radovan Beli Marković, a writer of a hybrid, not always easily mastered linguistic imagination, which moves between archaic, old Slavic language and parodies of high styles and pseudo-learned manners, occupies a special place within this orientation. Initially affirmed as a novelist, and then as the author of an unusual and extensive cycle of novels situated in the provincial district of Kolubara, he blends, in his “skewed” way, somewhat marginalized small-town narrative tradition in the manner of Stevan Sremac, Momčilo Nastasićević and Isidora Sekulić with postmodern self-awareness and unbridled

humorous and ironic playfulness (*Lajkovačka pruga* 1997, *Limunacija u Čelijama* 2000, *Poslednja ruža Kolubare* 2001, *Knez Miškin u Belom Valjevu* 2002, *Devet belih oblaka* 2003, *Orkestar na pedale* 2004, *Kavaleri starog premera*, 2006).

Turning to a fictional dealing with an obsessively evoked past, not so rarely pragmatically utilitarian and striving for collective enlightenment, novels with neo-historical and neo-civic themes have, as a rule, the purpose of cultural renewal and resort to expected narrative conventions as shortcuts to a broader audience's understanding and acceptance. A more pronounced tendency towards poetic innovations and the problematization of the overall picture of the world is, for the most part – although not exclusively – a privileged area of that part of novelistic production that is thematically closer to the contemporary, present times. However, this does not mean that history, with its riddles, obscured places, aporias and overall meaning, has completely disappeared from the view of this complementary poetic and thematic orientation of the Serbian novel.

### HISTORY STRIKES BACK: POSTMODERNIST CONTROVERSY AND ITS ECHOES

In the last significant endeavor of one of the most important literary journals in post-Broz Serbia, the editorial board of the Belgrade Literary Newspaper organized a series of talks, followed by authorized texts, on the current state of literature in the mid-1990s. These conversations had a strong polemical echo in the spring of 1996 in the weekly as well as daily press, until their activities were swept away by the unstoppable political storm. It became clear that the talks initiated and, at least for a short time, strongly stirred up literary spirits, revealing a kind of smoldering generational and poetic division.

At first glance, this division is made around the divergence in the understanding of purely professional issues between traditionalists and postmodernists, such as those concerning "imported poetics" on the one hand and "autistic archaism" on the other. However, at moments it showed its hidden, darkened face of a deeper dispute involving widely understood ideological irreconcilability and overall worldviews. Should Serbian literature and culture be oriented primarily nationally or internationally, should they be turned at all costs to themselves or the world, dedicated to the repressed or forgotten tradition or the affirmation of new values: these were doubts, sometimes tendentiously sharpened, which could be glimpsed at behind this proverbial misunderstanding between the "old" and the "young." Appearing from time to time and later as well, in the context of the overall crisis of society caused by

state disintegration and wars, in some respects they inevitably had an overtone and an echo that far surpassed literature itself.

The principled and practical (in the artisanal sense of the word) understanding of the novel, a megaphile genre very susceptible to the symbolic sublimation of collective self-consciousness, may have had a decisive place in this internal turmoil and search for the cultural and literary “mainstream”. Appearing in the early 1980s as a kind of generational response to the ruling paradigm of “reality prose” or so-called *new-style prose*, “young Serbian prose” was predominantly novelistically oriented and programmatically based on the postmodernist legacy of Borgesian erudite fiction. It soon turned to a more complex and demanding novelistic form, trying out numerous postmodernist strategies and procedures, almost entirely based on playful and subversive exploration of the limits of fiction and literary illusion in general.

In the eighties and early nineties, *new-prose* writers (Đorđe Pisarev, Franja Petrinović, Sava Damjanov, Predrag Marković, Vladimir Pištalo, Mileta Prodanović, Sreten Ugrićić, Milenko Pajić etc.) most often found refuge on the pages of “Književna reč” and from the mid-nineties, on the pages of the magazine “Reč”, relying on the works of already established novelists, such as Danilo Kiš or Borislav Pekić. However, they most often perceived the “Borgesian” Milorad Pavić as their predecessor and informal leader, whose *Hazarski rečnik* (1984), internationally known and read, became a kind of novelistic emblem and trademark of Serbian postmodernism as a poetic mélange in the making and self-formation.

Pavić’s novels from the end of the eighties, the nineties and the beginning of the new century (*Predeo slikan čajem* 1988, *Unutrašnja strana vatra* 1991, *Poslednja ljubav u Carigradu* 1994, *Kutija za pisanje* 1999, *Unikat* 2004, *Drugo telo* 2006) mostly offer authorized variations, a kind of exploiting the “Khazar” pattern by juxtaposing perspectives and problematizing official knowledge in the neo-baroque key of stylistic and overall textural exhaustion. In doing so, this exploitation rests on the repetition of two verified patterns, namely the nonlinearity of the mimetic type in terms of plot and composition (*Roman-ukrštenica*, *Roman-klepsidra*, *Priručnik za gatanje*, *Roman-delta*) and parabolic, Borgesian-like “costumed” and in a sense “ornamental” thematization of history as a postmodernist free image rather than a historiographically scrupulous or correctively ambitious reconstruction, which, at the same time, was proliferatively used in that other, poetically more scrupulous direction that the new historical novel took. Hesitating thematically between the somewhat older (*Poslednja ljubav u Carigradu*) and newer past (*Predeo slikan čajem*), but always equally faithful to the mannerist

concept of narrative *ars combinatoria* as a potentially infinite and at the same time self-serving overcoming of amorphous reality, Milorad Pavić appears to have outlined by himself the antimimetic treatment of history in contemporary Serbian literature.

Even the novels of younger writers of the same orientation did not present a more radical or significantly changed attitude towards the thematization of history as an unavoidable topic of Serbian literature today. In all these cases, history, almost as a rule, becomes a Rorschach-like template for the sovereign weaving of imagination and beautiful artistic illusion limited only by its own possibilities, whether it is postmodernist echoes of the Borgesian paradigm, as found in Aleksandar Gatalica's novelist ambivalence of the fictionalization of history and historization of fiction concentrated in the "problematic" experience of fatefully "replicative", often "cyclically" doubled and repeatable, Bulgakov-like heroes; or it is a more diffusely directed novelistic interest, as in the case of Pavić's, in the critics' view, official successor Goran Petrović, whose development started from an escapist-utopian and almost lyrically pure generational vision (*Atlas opisan nebom*, 1993), through Andrić-like extensive and Pavić-like divergent national-historiographical and ambitious storytelling (*Opsada crkve Svetog Spasa*, 1997), to the Calvinistically strange interference of both existential and reading experience (*Sitničarnica Kod srećne ruke*, 2000). Only at times would history be approached with a more conventional concept of representation.

It is here, at the possible point of the extreme poetic emancipation of the Borges-Pavić current, that perhaps a crucial question arose for all postmodernist-labeled or self-proclaimed writers in Serbian literature – in a way a "holistic" question of the image of the world and the meaning of history within it. Unlike the more traditionally oriented authors of the so-called new historical novel, as a rule with a clear historiographically revisionist or cognitively corrective goal, i.e. with a somewhat broader cultural-renewal direction in the case of novels with civic-renewal themes, the most numerous supporters of postmodernism in Serbia at the turn of the century, owing to their declarative aesthetic liberalism, faced an old dilemma in a new form, concerning the disposal of their own freedom.

*What to do with the conquered poetic self-awareness and ideological noncommitment or emancipation when the "vampire-like" history decides to make a spectacular comeback and makes every text that overlooks it or deliberately ignores it outdated?* This could be the dilemma that lies as an unwanted hurdle in the midst of the relatively broad and amorphous postmodernist niche of Serbian literature since the late 1980s, often the subject of confusion or a stumbling block, and only from time to time a source of invention or true inspiration. In response to the question of how – at the same time when in the international

context it was mostly based on sophisticated topics and problematization of knowledge about history – it could happen that postmodernism here, at least initially, was embraced with an almost ahistorical attitude, perhaps best understood through the testimony of the immediate participants that it was in fact “a generation of artists who, in their anti-ideological upbringing, found defense against the excessive ideology of the political system in which they lived.”

In the echoes of the generational poetic dispute of the mid-1990s, the authors of postmodernist affinities, sometimes even accused of “aggressive neo-communist arrivism” (D. Ćosić), were, though not exclusively, almost reluctantly forced to get out of the comfort of ideological leeway when writers of a different, more traditional choice, sometimes despite previous declarative determinations, had already largely taken somewhat more moderate positions in the so-called center, or more radical positions on the right side of the ideological political spectrum. The reception of *Hazarski rečnik*, which was extremely differently interpreted and appropriated, from ideologically neutral to unequivocally determined and historically biased understandings, in its own way testifies to the unsustainability of the initial anti-ideological position of postmodernists.

In this way, at some point almost imperceptibly, the controversy over postmodernism grew into a covert or open dispute over the issue of (dis)loyalty to publicly sanctioned notions of the relationship between art and patriotism as “issues of all issues” of a turbulent age, marking, even to this day, a double-coded public discourse on literature by merging poetic and ideological discourse. In this game with no clear and precisely defined rules, in which the main stake was always to impose oneself as the cultural “main current”, even the once passionate supporters of postmodernist poetic mannerism could not resist the siren call of cultural-historical themes. For instance, the former leader of the Belgrade Dream Manufactory, Vladimir Pištalo (*Milenijum u Beogradu* 2000, *Tesla, portret među maskama* 2008) or Đorđe Pisarev, who, unlike, say, Franja Petrinović (*Izveštaj anđela* 1996, *Poslednji tumač simetrije* 2005), alongside a whole range of novels written in the “young prose” spirit (*Gotska priča* 1990, *Kovčeg* 1998, *Zavera bliznakinja* 2000, *U srcu grada* 2004, *Ponoć je u sobi uspomena* 2005) still embraced current history as one of his themes (*Pod senkom zmaja* 2001). Some authors who came into prominence at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, such as Goran Milašinović (*Heraklov greh* 1999, *Posmatrač mora* 2001, *Camera obscura* 2003, *Apsint* 2005, *Maske Sofije de Montenj* 2007) or Saša Obradović (*Mardilan je najzad mrtav* 2005, *Vrt ljubavi* 2008, *Drugi drugi svijet* 2009), based their novel writing entirely on the alternative fictionalization of common places

and prominent figures of cultural and political history. At the same time, almost naturally, the “most competitive” were those postmodernist authors who managed to get closer to the middle of the ideological-political spectrum and by doing so at least to some extent reconcile conflicting incentives and demands.

The most balanced combination of postmodernist poetic self-consciousness drawing on history and tradition was made in *Sudbina i komentari* (1993) by Radoslav Petković, a writer of an already recognized gift and craftsmanship (*Senke na zidu* 1985, *Izveštaj o kugi* 1989). After Pekić’s sweeping *Zlatno runo* that set standards in every sense, this intelligently conceived novel that was nationally awarded almost every prize it could win is in fact the most poetically consistent expression of historiographical metafiction as a form of self-reflexive narration that, contemplating the conditions of its own representation of the past, at the same time critically considers the conditions of origin and reach of historical knowledge in general. Skillfully satisfying the affinities of somewhat more conservative as well as more liberal readers, Petković’s story about heroes willing to “say no to their destiny”, but also forced to face frustrated existences in the midst of great historical-political vortices, encompasses the chronological period ranging from the eighteenth to twentieth century. From the Napoleonic wars to, in an indirect and allusive sense, the new Balkan wars of our time, the novel introduces a fantastic and distinctly (post)modernist vision of the Borgesian garden with paths forking through the gates of time as an escapist and utopian dream of liberation from the destructive despotism of history.

At the center of this complex story, which symbolically follows the chronological progression of the narrative from the ancient to modern times with witty stylistic pastiches and parodic imitation, there is the character of Count Đorđe Branković, author of the famous *Slaveno-serbske hronike*, only recently published in its entirety, as a pseudo-historian and auto-mythographer, so characteristically trapped in his own historiographical imagination and torn between the extremes of collective glorification and complete oblivion. Not ignoring historical knowledge and bypassing facts while at the same time not being subject to them, but problematizing their controversial life in which history and fiction easily swap places and thus form a kind of vicious circle of understanding, interpretation and action on human consciousness and behavior, Radoslav Petković’s novel marked a relatively narrow but not inaccessible space where tradition and poetics actuality meet, and in the meantime it has set a standard for such a possibility in contemporary Serbian literature. Although also based on the historical evocation of the last days of Byzantium, his latest novel, *Savršeno sećanje na smrt* (2008), brings a partially different novelistic vision, focused on the history of alter-

native, esoteric knowledge and its destiny in cruel and competitive civilizational and political turmoil.

For writers of the postmodernist vocation, the 1990s were marked by doubts about the most favorable distance and perspective for novelistic shaping and mastering the past. If the authors of the new historical novel, in an attempt to find the causes of the current “occurrence of history”, almost as a rule reached for the recent history of the previous decades in a revisionist key, novelists with an ear for different postmodernist poetics hesitated between the extremes of narrating about older or, on the other hand, newer, still unfinished history, shown outside or within its usual limits and parameters, but without exception resisting the conventions of its perception.

Thus, Vladislav Bajac, who came into prominence as the author of the unusual *Knjiga o bambusu* (1989) and “geopoetic” fables entitled *Podmetači za snove* (1992), first published *Crna kutija* (1993), a parabolically created “Utopia of Afterreality”, only to briefly return in *Druid iz Singiduna* (1998) to the “Khazar” paradigm of re-examining cultural and historical knowledge on the narrative template of a story about a people lost in the historical gloom of the distant past, as well as to comment on human destinies in *Bekstvo od biografije* (2001) as “documented” biography of a personal attempt to mystify the “disappearance” of private history and rescue from the fate of the general historical and political determination. Finally, his latest novel, *Hamam Balkanija* (2008), is perhaps his most intriguing attempt to explore the problem of individual and collective identities in a chronological and thematic span of several centuries, with a series of poetic and textual “mystifications” that “upgrade” factography in a recognizable way, thus shaping the text of self-commenting fiction.

A member of the same generation as Bajac, Dragan Velikić, one of the most translated contemporary Serbian writers in Europe, is consistently looking at modernity as a palimpsest polygon of the intersection of opposing traditions and heritages. Velikić’s novels from the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (*Astragan* 1992, *Hamsin* 51 1993, *Severni zid* 1995, *Danteov trg* 1997, *Slučaj Bremen* 2001, *Dosije Domaševski* 2003, *Ruski prozor* 2007), written with great stylistic and artistic care and as narratively bifurcated versions of the same obsessive story with different heroes, thematize spiritual and existential imprints of value crisis, as well as signs and consequences of the breakup of the Yugoslav community on the basis of the cultural and historical memory of Central Europe and the general civilisational and intellectual experience of the end of the century. Just as his heroes, stateless people who cannot be situated in

space and time and who compulsively follow an impossible path of searching for personal and universal identity, so Velikić's novels symbolically evoke an uncertain poetic search for the freshness of discovering the great modernist literature of Musil, Nabokov, and Kish.

Almost no matter whom of the more pronounced authors with an ear for postmodernist skepticism towards the so-called great narratives is in question, it is possible to follow a similar shift from real or at least apparent ahistoricity, i.e. superficial interest in history, to writing about current history from "up close". David Albahari, an excellent stylist and master of short stories, one of the immediate predecessors of the young prose wave, switched almost imperceptibly and for good poetic reasons in the 1990s to a somewhat longer and more complex narrative form of "short book", almost a novel, open to the voices of current historical reality. *Kratka knjiga* (1993), *Snežni čovek* (1995), *Mamac* (1996), works written in the same creative momentum, can be read today as an informal emigrant trilogy or – in the writer's words – "voluntarily exile" trilogy of our space and time, i.e. as a symbolically fragmentary narrative about preparations for departure and final departure to the New World, about writing as a testimony to the long shadow of the past that accompanies the self-reflexive hero and narrator, becoming a measure of existential and metaphysical disintegration of boundaries and outlines of knowledge.

Continuing earlier narrative research on the very edge between speech and silence, the utterable and the unspeakable, the author of the famous *Cink* turned to the phantasm of history as a vanishing totality of meaning with multiplying reflections and apparitions, in a sense analogous to the phantasm of the Text as an already extinct totality, recuperable only by pieces, voices and echoes of once great and comprehensive stories. *Mrak* (1997), *Gec i Majer* (1998), *Ludvig* (2007) i *Brat* (2008), Albahari's short "engaged" novels announce the return of fabula and plot, either thematizing the Holocaust or current political events and conspiracy theories. As *Svetski putnik* (2001) and *Pijavice* (2005), two longer novels from this period, show in their own way, David Albahari's narrative skills travelled almost the entire circle, reaching the point from which they first started. The hermetic and almost private world of the first books, *Sudija Dimitrijević* and *Porodično vreme*, was now replaced by a wide, profane and apocalyptic world of (post)historical time in which the ghosts of the past return as grotesque "globe trotters", capable of going everywhere and flooding even and those distant ahistorical corners, building a figure of cyclical repetition of violence which, as a self-explanatory literary creation, points to the structure of reality as a polygon not only of ideological and political projections, but also of infinitely renewable historical projections with a "constructional" error.

“When historians begin to create new myths and writers destroy existing ones, then the coordinate system of our understanding of reality disintegrates,” says Albahari in a recent essay called *Teret* dealing with the relation between literature and history, adding that “a whole generation of writers who were, until ten years ago, considered postmodernists – which for many was another term for escape from reality, can now be called historical writers”.

If the first, Pavić line of Serbian postmodernism and the notion of literature that emerged from it rests on a baroque-like bifurcated and stylistically exhaustive evocation of modernist erudite fiction of the Borgesian type, then this second line, conditionally called Albaharian, relies to a greater extent on the stylistic and expressive minimalism of recent Anglo-American literature. While the first line, for which history is mainly a template and occasion for a combinatorial game of imagination and we can speak about it as of a kind of historiographical mannerism, the other line also relies on a vision that sees history as the cause, rather than the trigger, as well as a structural mirror, in which the art of fictional narration, under certain conditions, can provide a glimpse of something of its own nature. This nature is always subject to skepticism and revaluation, as is the case with the past, which leads to the conclusion that, on the occasion of such a postmodernist treatment of history, it is possible to speak of a special kind of historiographical homology.

Following in Albahari’s literary and emigrant footsteps, the gifted novelist Vladimir Tasić (*Pseudologija fantastika* 1995, *Radost brodolomnika* 1997), one of the few younger Serbian writers with a Canadian residence, testifies to the vitality, if not the number, of the homologous line with his notable novels from the beginning of the new century. As in the case of Albahari, Tasić’s *Oproštajni dar* (2001), the contemplative, lyrical, private, minimalist and much more complex novel *Kiša i hartija* (2004) intertwined with the mystifying knowledge of the Pynchonian kind in which an alternative, parahistorical vision creates a refined symbolism of writing, require a dedicated and at least partially knowledgeable reader. This reader is less interested in having fun while reading, and much more in contradictory pleasure in the text, which does not simplify, but sometimes further complicates and makes the picture of the presented world more serious. In turn, it offers the illusion of indirect, figuratively structured recognizability in the midst of the sound and the fury of current historical reality. The third novel in Tasić’s unofficial emigrant trilogy *Stakleni zid* (2008), which deals with echoes, screams and whispers that have accompanied the legacy of public crimes of the Milošević era for decades, is also the farthest and most risky step towards capturing the essence of reality.

In a sense, it is a possible connection with the vision that appears within the third relevant current or faction of Serbian postmodernism, which, owing to the undoubted popularity of Svetislav Basara's fictional opus, could be named the Basarian line of historiographical carnivalism. Ridicule is a key figure in Basara's prose, his novels that thematize the "twisted world" of the savage history of the ex-Yugoslav and Serbian space from the end of the century. From *Kinesko pismo* (1985) and *Napuklo ogledalo* (1986), through *Fama o biciklistima* (1988), *Mongolski bedecker* (1992) and *Ukleta zemlja* (1995), all the way to *Looney Tunes* (1996), *Sveta mast* (1998), *Kratkodnevnica* (2000) or, say, *Srce zemlje* (2004), *Uspon i pad Parkinsonove bolesti* (2006) and *Dnevnik Marte Koen* (2008), nothing in Basara's novels is so inviolable that it cannot be ridiculed: ideology, tradition, intellectual fashion, or art. In Basara's humorously grotesque and parodic burlesque books, the ridiculing inauthenticity of narrating the world, which easily resorts to Beckettian and Kafkaesque topoi or Freudian stereotypes, is a consequence of the tragicomic inauthenticity of the world which appears to be an all-encompassing illusion.

Vowing that all his books, as he says in one place, will "speak of horror, preferably in a witty way", since "horror is the basic human motive", Basara actually repeats the same model of universal and playful reversal of values, common notions, and logical relations, based on the carnivalesque (non)serious and subversive assumption that "the differences between documentary and fictional material are often formal ...", hence history itself "parasitically feeds on reality, it looks real, it simulates all the features of the authentic world, but there is no authenticity in it". And although Cioran's prophetic idea of universal inauthenticity and metaphysical farce in the very heart of the (post)historical reality of our time often becomes an alibi for leisurely craftsmanship and unevenness in quality, Basara's rhetorical juggling of carnivalized images of reality is still one of the most suggestive and most seductive possibilities in the postmodernist "wing" of Serbian literature.

Explicit playfulness represents the point of contact, and at the same time the point of possible differentiation of Basarian "faction" in relation to the mannerist "faction" established by Pavić. Similar to Pavić's "neo-baroque" puzzle novels, compositionally nonlinear, hypertextual narrative puzzles, Basara's ironic and sarcastic novels rest on a certain combinatorial freedom, often expressed in unlimited antimimetic play with conventional narrative props, such as the concentrically multiplied use of the technique of the so-called found manuscript or (quasi) epistolary narration.

Unlike Pavić's line, which mostly remains true to its affinity for tastefully "costumed" pseudo-historical painting of the past, Svetislav

Basara's novelistic provocations show a tendency towards recognizable, scandalously brazen and carnivalesque "costuming" and liberatingly subversive historicization of the contemporary times. From his very first books, Basara did not hide his inclination for imaginative re-examination and deconstruction of ideological stereotypes, and in this way exempted himself early on from the ideological passivity of the emerging Serbian postmodernism. Starting from *Fama o biciklistima*, through *Ukleta zemlja*, all the way to the grotesquely satirical "manic-paranoid history of Serbian literature" in two parts (*Looney Tunes, Sveta mast*), Basara always insisted on the polemical and mocking painting of the paradigmatic figures and events of the Serbian cultural and political scene in the eighties and early nineties. Some of Basara's carnivalism and satire, brought to the imaginatively disparate dimensions of the so-called Menippean satire and applied to current cultural and historical circumstances, appears in one of the most notable novelistic debuts of contemporary Serbian literature, personified in *Lutajući Bokelj* (2007) by Nikola Malović.

Even more pronounced satire in demystifying quasi-values is brought by the novels of the former young prose writer Mileta Prodanović (*Pleši, čudovište, na moju nežnu muziku* 1996, *Crvena marama, sva od svile* 1999, *Ovo bi mogao biti vaš srećan dan* 2000, *Kolekcija* 2005), who, in the genre range from parody to anti-utopia, ruthlessly deals with the causes and consequences of intellectual and moral collapse of Milošević's Serbia. A similar prose paradigm within the next generation includes the novels of the Niš-based writer Zoran Ćirić (*Prisluškivanje* 1999, *Hobo* 2001, *Slivnik* 2004, *Gang of Four* 2005), which are also characterized by a critically ironic and sarcastically travestied attitude towards the gloomy reality, but also by the need to present that reality not from superior and safe artistic heights, but, in the characteristic combination of outsider neo-rock sensibility and all-encompassing urge for a carnival inversion of clichéd performances, to tackle it "from within", in its unadorned and informing freshness. With his two novels from the planned trilogy "Dnevnik dezterera" (2004) and (2006), the Niš-based poet with strong influence of rock music in his poetry Zvonko Karanović hinted at similar and yet special possibilities of harsh poetic painting of generational destinies in a gloomy social and civilizational environment. The final, partly contradictory form of this particular use of generational themes is featured in Marko Vidojković's novels (*Ples sitnih demona* 2001, *Kandže* 2004, *Sve Crvenkape su iste* 2006), commercially successful works that blend neo-punk sensibility, extremeness in the storylines, satirizing social circumstances of the 1990s, popular genre topoi and erotic provocation.

Authors of different sensibilities belong to the poetically already significantly divided generation of postmodernist writers in the broadest sense of the word: Laslo Blašković, writing in a Kiš-like and stylistically ornate manner (*Svadbeni marš* 1997, *Mrtva priroda sa satom* 2000, *Madonin nakit* 2003, *Adamova jabučica* 2005, *Turnir grbavaca* 2007); Mirko Demić, writer of romance biographies with a metafictional touch (*Čilibar, med, oskoruša* 2001, *Apokrifi o Furtuli* 2003, *Sluge hirovitog lučonoše* 2006); Vladan Matijević, a prize-winning ironic poet of triviality and banality (*Van kontrole* 1995, *R.C. Neminovno* 1997, *Pisac iz daleka* 2003, *Časovi radosći* 2006); Nemanja Rotar, author of historiographical compositions inspired by postmodernism (*Čuvari Balkana* 2002, *Poslednja noć na Levantu* 2004, *Netrpeljivost* 2006, *Dnevnik ljudozdera* 2008). There are also authors, new and old at the same time, who uphold Borgesian and Pavić's tradition of literary mystification and fantastic playfulness: Srdjan Tešin (*Antologija najboljih naslova* 2000, *Kazimir i drugi naslovi* 2003, *Kroz pustinju i prašinu* 2005, *Kuvarove kletve i druge gadosti* 2006), then Miloš Latinović (*Slučaj violiniste i drugi događaji* 1997, *Priče vetrova* 1998, *Šekspirov klijent* 2002, *Davolji triler* 2003, *Dželat u raju* 2006), as well as the eclectic novelist Igor Marojević, each time introducing completely different themes and period, from the Basarian-Kafkaesque narration of absurd modernity (*Obmana boga* 1997), AIDS-related generational confession (*Dvadeset četiri zida* 1998), to the pseudo-genre depiction of the Montenegrin-Serbian historical controversy (*Žega* 2004), i.e. the historical tangle of totalitarianism and knowledge (*Šnit* 2007).

Not so much on the poetic as on the ideological margin of postmodernism, there are unusual and interesting novels by two peculiar Novi Sad-based writers, Judita Šalgo and Vojislav Despotov. In both cases, their literary opuses began as part of neo-avant-garde tendencies of the 1970s and ended due to fateful circumstances in the midst of their full creative peak. Still, they were sufficiently accomplished to occupy a significant place in the imaginative domains of the modern novel in the Serbian language. Despotov is the author of an informal novelistic triptych from the 1990s, which consists of *Jesen svakog drveta* (1997), *Evropa broj 2* (1998) and *Drvodelja iz Nabisala* (1999) covering a decade-long chronological interval from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the bombing of Serbia, and it is characterized by a special combination of lyrical and ironic sensibility and a distinctly fantastic and grotesque narrative imagination. This is especially true of *Jesen svakog drveta*, one of the best, though not sufficiently valued and noticed novels of the 1990s, which suggestively and inventively, in terms of the use of symbols, thematizes the ambivalent feeling of the Eastern European and ex-Yugoslav people at the moment when a decades-long political

constellation falls apart and they face the paradox of melancholic freedom after a long stay in a fenced and “safe” communist space. The other two novels show the contradictory consequences of this turning point in the parabolic images of the local and regional decline, that is, in the negative utopian visions of what happens in human souls after the end of ideological projects.

Some of this characteristic combination of anti-utopian imagination and historical and eschatological themes also appears in Judita Šalgo’s *Put u Birobidžan* (1997) and its posthumously published, unfinished sequel *Kraj puta* (2004). Depicting the back side of history, from the multiple outsider positions of the despised and persecuted (concentration camp inmates, Jews, women) and their personal, familial, collective illusions and utopian phantasms about the Siberian “promised land” as their final deliverance, Judita Šalgo provided a skewed, authentic novelistic vision, which touches on already thematized aspects in contemporary Serbian literature (Pekić, Kiš, Albahari), but at the same time suggested new and exciting possibilities of expanding expressive and imaginative boundaries. Perhaps even more comprehensive and significant, if not more shaped and artistically complete compared to Despotov, this vision bears the stamp of a self-conscious commitment to an alternative view of the world and position beyond any will to power and belonging to the mainstream.

#### “SWIMMERS” OUTSIDE THE “MAIN CURRENTS”: CULTUR-EMIGRANT, INTELLECTUALLY-EXPERIMENTAL, GENRE AND FEMALE PARADIGM

The obsession with history, whether it is perceived as chronologically complete and cognitively controversial, or as a disturbing “raw meat” of the present that has yet to be literarily processed, is the most significant feature of the Serbian novel at the turn of the century. This seems to apply equally to both of the great “currents” of contemporary Serbian literature: the traditionally oriented “current”, whether of the revisionist-utilitarian or cultural-renewal orientation, and the postmodernly oriented “current”, depending on the extent to which each of its three potential poetic “factions” – mannerist, homologistic and carnivalesque – approaches the thematization of the past either with a “naïve” confidence in knowledge or with an awareness of its inevitably ideological character and construction.

Aggressively and forcibly, the newly awakened historical and political consciousness at the end of the eighties entered the everyday life of ordinary and professional readers, lulled for decades into the illusion of an ideologically conflict-free paradise, in the same way that history

became an unavoidable topic for writers of one or another orientation, involved in the conquest of a poetic and ideological space called the “mainstream” in the national culture of an era. Although, at least in the beginning, the audience and a good part of the cultural public sided with the writers with a more traditional, poetically moderate and ideologically simpler orientation, poetically more modern authors had artistically more intriguing and influential achievements, although not always in their individual contributions. They opened a challenging space for literary re-examination of conventional ways of artistic presentation, as well as for problematizing ideologically “stable” performances, which depend more on “supra-literary” interests than on special, self-consciously used means of literary transposition and sublimation of reality. The absence of a pronounced polemical charge and the poetic and ideological exclusiveness of former “pioneers” of one or another literary “current” in the last few years seems to indicate a new cultural situation and possible post-Milošević homogenization, or at least “peaceful coexistence” of the two until recently irreconcilable aspirations to win the influential position of the literary “mainstream”. Although they occupy the most significant part of the literary scene, these two, at least until recently complementary poetic and ideological currents, are still not all that the literary scene has to offer. The question is, in fact, what, after all, the so-called public or official scene of the Serbian literature really encompasses. It is not so much a matter of the fact that it is impossible, and perhaps no longer necessary, to make a “pure” and strict literary “stratification”, since neither current is entirely homogeneous, but both are divided into “wings” and “factions”. Sometimes they show similarities, e.g. in the literary practice of some of the writers oriented towards cultural renewal, more inclined to modern creative approaches (D. Nikolić, R. Beli Marković), then in the characteristic thematic and ideological interest in the fate of Serbian and Central European bourgeoisie, in the novels of poetically more modernly oriented writers (R. Petković, D. Velikić), who in a way still stand aside from the leading modernist “factions” of the last two decades of Serbian literature.

To a certain extent, the same can be said for the unspecified authors of the mainstream, e.g. for Filip David (*Hodočasnici neba i zemlje* 1995, *San o ljubavi i smrti* 2007) and Milisav Savić (*Hleb i strah* 1991, *Ožiljci tištine* 1997, *Princ i srbski spisatelj* 2008), as well as for Nikola Milošević (*Nit miholjskog leta* 1996, *Kutija od orahovog drveta* 2003, *Senke minulih ljubavi* 2005), as well as for the esteemed interpreter of Andrić, Dostoyevsky and Mann, Dragan Stojanović, who, as a possible representative of the erudite paradigm under the influence of Eco and Pavić, the so-called professorial literature, wrote a collection of narrative pastiches *Svetska književnost* (1988) in order to tackle in an allusive

and ironic way the moral and metaphysical questions of beauty and the survival of spiritual harmony in a world of shattered values in his subsequent, novelistic works (*Dvojež* 1995, *Zločin i kazna* 1996, *Benzin* 2000, *Okean* 2005, *Urednik od iskustva* 2009).

The understanding of the current literary scene is determined in a special way by the position of marginal(ized) actors as symbolic boundaries of its inevitably provisional and diffuse cultural space. Owing to controversial internal and external non-literary circumstances, Serbian literature, for the first time in a long period, gained cultural emigration with small “centers” in Europe (Amsterdam, Vienna) and North America (Canada). In the meantime, a significant number of writers who left the country for various reasons have literally remained somewhere on the edge of literary life. This is especially true of some of the most notable members of the generation of young prose writers, but the authors who found themselves in Canada (D. Albahari, N. Vasović, B. Tasić) achieved an enviable literary effect and left a visible mark in shaping the overall Serbian literary scenes from the end of the previous and the beginning of this century. There is, on the other hand, what could be called the cultural-immigrant literature of writers who immigrated from the former Yugoslav republics.

In this context, several Sarajevo-born writers should certainly be mentioned. First, Stevan Tonić, a distinguished poet (*Sarajevski rukopis*, 1995) but also the author of a suggestive novel *Tvoje srce, zeko* (1998), which, with a specific mixture of charge that is veristic and naturalistic on the one hand, and humorous and ironic on the other, provides a complex experience of war suffering in Sarajevo. Then, Nenad Veličković, author of witty and hilarious novels about family and war (*Konačari* 1998, *Sahib* 2002, *Otac moje kćeri* 2003, *100 zmajeva* 2007), also a gifted narrator Vule Žurić, writer of alternative, rock-jazz sensibility, able to thematize generational experience and the experience of the region in his novels in a way that does not conform to ideological or reader stereotypes, but re-examines the appearance of media, folklore and collective clichés (*Blagi dani zatim prođu* 2001, *Rinfuz* 2003, *Tigrero* 2005, *Crne čurke* 2006, *Mrtve brave* 2008). Finally, Vladimir Kecmanović managed to problematize the picture of the recent past with his two novels (*Feliks* 2007, *Top je bio vreo* 2008). Providing a first-hand outlook on the Bosnian war tragedy, these writers opened a thematic “window” to the traumatic core that had not yet received culturally comprehensive treatment, although somewhat on the margins in relation to official criticism and the literary public. Viewed in this context, a special, even mediating position was occupied by writers from the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro who had their works published in Serbia and thus took a more active part in the local literary life.

However, the writers of the new cultural emigration who self-consciously and deliberately, even demonstratively chose the estranged position have a real outsider position in Serbian literature, acquiring almost the status of dissidents. This was also true for the atypical authorial figure of Vidosav Stevanović, who travelled the path from a notable narrator and novelist close to the aesthetics of reality prose (*Nišči* 1971), through, on the eve of the Milošević period, a short-lived position, during which he received the NIN award, of a publicly recognized pioneer of the future mainstream national literature (*Testament* 1986), to a voluntary outcast and fierce critic of Milošević's Serbia. In the so-called Balkan trilogy (*Sneg u Atini* 1992, *Ostrvo Balkan* 1993, *Hristos i psi* 1993), Stevanović described the current existential and historical circumstances in a satirical and tendentious, primarily moralistic and humanistic way (*Abel i Liza* 2001). Having his books published mostly outside Serbia, like some other writers, or, as in recent years, exclusively by the alternative Belgrade "Writers' Forum", Stevanović established for himself a completely separate and self-conscious polemical position without a real counterpart on the literary scene.

On the imaginary map of Serbian literature, Bora Čosić and Mirko Kovač, two writers who settled in Croatia in the 1990s, today stand closest to this marginalized position. Bora Čosić is a writer of Krlezian aesthetics and complex intertextuality, who has published his novels in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Split and Belgrade in the last twenty years (*Rasulo* 1991, *Carinska deklaracija* 2000, *Izgnanici* 2005, *Put na Aljasku* 2006, *Konzul u Beogradu* 2007). Mirko Kovač is a renowned narrator and novelist, author of a controversial and polemical novel (*Kristalne rešetke* 1995) who, by thematically confronting urban and rural sensibilities in the story of the artistic group Mediala as an alternative cultural consciousness of the late Broz period, undoubtedly enters the referential national literary framework, while, when adhering to the so-called Western variant of the former Serbo-Croatian literary language when stylizing the speech of urban Belgrade heroes, leaves that same framework. Kovač's last novel (*Grad u zrcalu* 2007) brings a retrospective familial and personal vision with autobiographical indications, in which it is possible to recognize the topoi and moments of the writer's entire opus so far.

The indifference and disinterest of these and similar authors in responding to their own choice of margin in relation to the implied public, cultural, and ideological center, even when it comes to conceptual disputes, as well as their sporadic literary engagement, suggests a prevailing model that can be defined as a form of *cultural focalism*. Explicitly dealing with writers and works belonging to the current mainstream, and ignoring borderline and marginal cases, or, on the other hand, counter-ignoring or obsessively negating mainstream literature

on the opposite, alternative side – this is the cultural situation largely inherited from the 1990s that even today, without decisive changes, characterizes literary life. Despite noteworthy attempts, there is still no dialogue between the representatives of the main trends and the cultural alternative that would mean respecting and contemplating diversity as the most likely polygon of self-understanding; what we have is a kind of echo-speech, overemphasized or distorted echoes of one's own, aesthetically or ideologically completely rounded and untouchable conceptions.

Failing to adapt to trends and patterns, it happens that interesting writers in various ways remain practically on the very edge of the official cultural sphere. Such is, for example, the case with Srdan Valjarević, who placed himself on the margins with his debut book (*List na korici hleba* 1990) only to shape that position as his chosen literary identity with the works that followed. In terms of genre, these works are hybrid with elements of fictional as well as diary and memoir, i.e. non-fictional prose (*Ljudi za stolom* 1994, *Zimski dnevnik* 1995, *Dnevnik druge zime* 2005). The novel *Komo* (2006) is a semi-diary confession of a marginal character who finds himself in unexpected surroundings of the intellectual elite and Rousseau-like pristine nature. In the same context, we should mention two other, in a way complementary examples, the first of which is Veselin Marković's universally intoned, poetically “non-aligned” novel about love, guilt, (self)punishment and self-understanding, metaphorically entitled *Izranjanje* (2001), and the other, extremely critically intoned, anti-war and politically relevant, morally provocative and humanely appealing novel by Saša Ilić, also with a metaphorical title *Berlinsko okno* (2005).

Although, despite some provisionality and internal tension, the cultural situation thus established is still marked by relative permanence and duration, it is at the same time conjuncturally determined. According to the implied *cultural focalism*, basically phlegmatic and intolerant of what does not enter the center of public interest, the acquisition of general and special opportunities sometimes inevitably moves individual writers from the center to the periphery of interest of the “centripetal” literary public. The following two examples are quite illustrative in this regard. Vladimir Arsenijević, the youngest winner of the prestigious NIN award since it was first established (*U potpalubju* 1994), regardless of the sequel as part of his announced tetralogy *Cloaca maxima* about the lost generations of Milošević's time (*Andela* 1997), the “war diary” entitled *Mexico* (2000) and “illustrated” novel *Išmail* (2004) made in collaboration with the cult comic artist Aleksandar Zografić (Saša Rakezić), the novelistically “fragmented” *Predator* (2008), as well as the enterprising work he did in alternative publishing (“Rende”), moved

from the focus of literary sphere to its margin, which is completely in line with his authorial orientation and attitudes.

Another, generationally different example is the recently deceased Pavle Ugrinov, an author who reached his stellar moments in the 1970s and 1980s, with novels with some elements of non-fiction prose about the rise of liberal intelligentsia in the mature age of Yugoslav socialism (*Fascinacije* 1976, *Zadat život* 1979, *Carstvo zemaljsko* 1982). Although he continued to publish novels of similar thematic orientation and craftsmanship in the 1990s (*Tople pedesete* 1990, *Savon de fleurs* 1993), Ugrinov, owing to changed ideological and aesthetic circumstances, was off the radar of official critics, already focused on other topics and problems, so his novels and memoir prose, published since the mid-1990s (*Egzistencija* 1996, *Antiegzistencija* 1998, *Utopija* 1997, *Besudni dani* 2001), innovative and valuable from the point of view of intellectual history of recent past, actually remained on the margins of the official literary sphere.

One of the most distinctive novels of the 1990s, *Dekartova smrt* (1996) by Radomir Konstantinović, remained in that zone voluntarily. Radomir Konstantinović is the author of the cult work *Filosofija palanke* (1969) and the capital eight-volume study on modern Serbian poetry entitled *Biće i jezik* (1983), who in recent years has been completely removed from public communication and withdrawn into a kind of internal dissident space. Written in the wake of Konstantinović's early intellectually experimental prose in the 1950s and 1960s, *Dekartova smrt* is a meditative and philosophical novel that captivates and at the same time provokes with its monologic-associative, intertextual and symbolic-archetypal weaving, within which key narrative figures such as father and son, in other words Descartes and Pascal, open a space, stimulating in the narrative and essayistic sense for imaginative reflection on general issues of the relationship between reason and passion, criticism and faith, authority and freedom, not only in presenting the civilizational destiny of the domestic but also European intellectual elite.

Not so numerous and appreciated, this experimental line of the contemporary Serbian novel, despite the relatively long and significant tradition from the interwar period of the so-called historical avant-garde, found its probably most expressive representative in Voja Čolanović, a noted and awarded writer of *Zebnja na rasklapanje* (1987). Continuing the creative adventure of tempting the ultimate possibilities as well as semantic and receptive feasibility of narrative fiction in minimalist conditions, Čolanović, without lowering the demands placed on his own writing, published two apparently most radical attempts in the form of novel, confessional *Džepna kob* (1996), the “unborn child” novel conceived in Sternian fashion and realized in an ironic and modernist

manner, and *Lavovski deo ničega* (2002), a story told backwards as an unusual novelistic re-examination of the possibilities of narrative logic and syntax, which by unwinding the narrative tangle beyond all conventions, questions the logic of current political and historical reality, which easily falls into fatal oblivion.

A very special place in this context is occupied by critically bypassed novels by the esteemed translator and essayist Žarko Radaković, closest to some kind of modified Handkean poetics and sensibility that accompanies it (*Knifer* 1994, *Ponavljanja* (co-authorship with Scott Abbot) 1994, *Pogled* 2002), and, especially, novels by Slavoljub Marković (*Gradivo* 1993, *Projekat* 1994, *Dosada usvojenih rečnika* 1995, *Značenja i proteze* 1998, *Paralelna biblioteka* 2000), consistently and uncompromisingly based on the narratively explicit cooperation of metalinguistic and metafictional self-consciousness, but also almost unnoticed in their diversity and apartness. The fact that even somewhat younger novelists (Sreten Ugričić: *Maja i ja i Maja* 1988, *Infinitiv* 1997), in principle less burdened by tradition, only sporadically and in a more serious and meaningful effort adhere to this experimentally innovative and intellectually demanding branch of novelistic fiction, speaks volumes about its position within the overall order of the most demanding and most popular prose literature.

The widespread action of cultural focalism, compulsively focused almost exclusively on history and historiographical narrative in the last twenty years, regardless of whether the aspiration in question is traditionalist or postmodernist, is also visible in the position of novelistic fiction which stands at the other end of the expressive spectrum in relation to the intellectually expressive line. The literature in question is the so-called genre literature as a kind of narrative prose which, contrary to the anti-conventional, innovation-searching urge of experimental fiction, in its standard form mostly rests on adopted thematic and structural patterns and established notions or images of world, regardless of which concrete genre model the focus is on (crime novel, SF, romance novel, jeans prose). Unlike the contemporary Croatian prose, which in the eighties made a step towards the convergence and fusion of the so-called artistic and genre literature in the works of several notable writers (P. Pavličić, G. Tribuson, D. Ugrešić), the Serbian prose, including the novel, remained largely true to the usual constellation, within which genre literature was still peripherally placed, not so far from the realm of subcultural and so-called trivial literature. Despite some interest of the audience, new attempts to place “serious” writers in this marginal area (e.g., thematically commissioned blocks of erotic and crime stories in a magazine “Reč” in the 1990s) did not have a far-reaching effect in the form of creatively significant and systematic

authorial endeavors. In that respect, the lonely position of Zoran Živković as undoubtedly the most famous writer of this orientation is characteristic. Although Živković has the legitimacy of an independent author of the first Serbian *Enciklopedija naučne fantastike* (1990), a number of international awards as well as numerous translations of his unusual hybrid books, which intriguingly combine SF, so-called epic fiction and fiction in the usual sense of the word (*Četvrti krug* 1993, *Vremenski darovi* 1997, *Pisac* 1998, *Knjiga* 1999, *Skrivena kamera* 2003, *Most* 2006, *Poslednja knjiga* 2007) and can actually be read as potential (multi)genre mainstream, only recently has he begun to receive somewhat more attention from the official literary public. Something similar could be said about Mirjana Đurđević, a prolific novelist who without any hesitation enters the privileged “male” genre domain, mostly successfully parodying the love, spy and crime novel patterns (*Treći sector ili Sama žena u tranziciji* 2001, *Ubistvo u Akademiji nauka* 2002, *Prvi, drugi, treći čovek* 2006, *Čuvari svetinje* 2007, etc.) and permeating them with a hilarious persiflage of the actions of the political and cultural elite, in other words, social stereotypes and preconceptions.

Some other, otherwise notable authors were frequently given importance, although their novels, with their overall qualities, do not deserve it. It is true, as previously pointed out, that there are authors who, with their novelistic opus spontaneously became part of the mainstream (S. Velmar-Janković) or at least of its border areas (J. Šalgo, M. Mićić-Dimovska). But it is also true that the female writing scene, very diverse and interesting in recent years, is generally perceived by the literary public as polarized, that is, divided between commercially oriented authors (Ljiljana Habjanović-Đurović, Mirjana Bobić-Mojsilović, Isidora Bjelica, Vesna Radusinović, etc.) and the (neo)feminist circle, gathered around the conceptually profiled magazine ProFemina from the mid-nineties onwards (Ljiljana Đurđić, Radmila Lazić, Dubravka Đurđić, etc.), more oriented towards programmatically theoretical and poetically essayistic than narratively fictional writing.

However, between these two extremes in Serbian literature today and the still prevailing cultural focalism based on the principle of “either-or” – either works that belong to aggressive and populist “male” writing, or to defensive and intimately self-sufficient “female” writing, lacking understanding of transitional or hybrid modes on both sides – there is a whole series of unique self-conscious female writers who thematically and “ideologically” stand out in relation to the conventions of the predominantly male-profiled literary mainstream, and yet do not quite adhere to the conventions of doctrinally “female” or feminist writing.

As an example, we can cite notable novelistic titles by Snežana Jakovljević (*Eva od kaveza* 1995, *Ipal* 1997, *En, den, dinu...* 2000). Although owing to the recognizable plot and thematic structure as well as tender sensibility they could easily be recognized and labeled as sophisticated genre products of romance novel, suitable for a clichéd understanding of female fiction sentiment, the attentive reader will recognize them as poetically fluid and symbolically complex works, realized in a meaningful interference of subtle semantic signals, ranging from micro-interpretations of gestures and situations, to understanding typological, genre and atypically “ideological” meanings of the narrated world as a whole.

Something similar could be said for the novels of Ljubica Arsić (*Čuvari kazačke ivice* 1988, *Ikona* 2001, *Mango* 2008), Gordana Čirjanić (*Pretposlednje putovanje* 2000, *Kuća u Puerto* 2003, *Poljubac* 2007) and Sanja Domazet (*Ko plače* 2005, *Azil* 2006), which depart visibly from “the sound and the fury” of the world, nation and history towards the private and imaginary worlds of heroes, also the novels by Mirjana Mitrović (*Autoportret sa Milenom* 1990, *Emilija Leta* 2006), dedicated to the fate of cult female figures in the cruel world of “male” affairs, as well as the novels by Mirjana Novaković (*Strah i njegov sluga* 2000, *Johann's 501* 2005), ironically distanced from official history and the great ideological constructions of past and present times, and in favor of a slanted, humorous and grotesque, outsider view of the world.

The modern approach in combination with gender issues and the thematization of relevant themes and topics also characterizes the novels authored by Ljiljana Jokić Kaspar (*Liliputanci putuju u XXI vek* 1993, *Četiri male žene* 1996, *Čelavi psi* 1998, *Yu-file* 2000). With their poetic framework, these novels touch on the postmodernist paradigm, to which the novelistic experiments of Marija Ivanić (*Eseji o junaku* 1996, *Bajka o Meliti* 1998, *Zubin venac* 2001, *Srpski vojvoda Lješ Spani* 2004), meta-fictionally intoned and showing the contradictory position of individual consciousness and identity in the encounter with gender, ethnic and historical stereotypes, belong to an even greater extent.

On the other hand, Mira Otašević's short, intertextually intertwined and artistically thought-out novels (*Magamal* 1994, *Ničeova sestra* 1999, *Zmajevi od papira* 2008) fully belong to the alternative, intellectually experimental line of the contemporary Serbian novel presented in this section. It attracts the least attention of the cultural public, narratively exploring issues of power, knowledge, civilizational emancipation and cultural creation in a way that overrides the conventions of “male” and “female” narrative writing, as well as the famous opposition of national and world literature, and turns to ideologically self-conscious universalism that goes beyond conventions, preconceptions and stereotypes.

Such an orientation, in its own way, is joined by the first novel by Barbi Marković *Izlaženje* (2006), a very successful generational story written in the Bernhardian manner and with the ultimate effect of overcoming social, age, gender and ideological constraints to suggest a lost-and-found sensibility that could concern each reader individually. In a sense, although in a somewhat “softer” form, it could also refer to the novels of Sonja Atanasijević (*Oni su ostali* 1995, *Bekstvo iz akvarijuma* 2003, *Narandže za Božanu* 2004, *Crveni krug* 2006) or Laura Barna (*Nevolje gospodina T. ili Suteren* 2006, *Crno telo* 2007, *Moja poslednja glavobolja* 2008), as well as to the debut novels of Dunja Radosavljević (*Život posle Amerike* 2008) and Dana Todorović (*Tragična sudska Morica Tota* 2008), despite very different poetic assumptions and authorial sensibilities behind them.

Although, according to its poetic structure and ideological orientation, literature of this kind is not an invasive phenomenon that could become one of the possible “main currents”, along with other marginal phenomena and orientations, it is undoubtedly no less important and valuable space of fiction and culture. Overall, together with the most successful, poetically self-conscious and ideologically emancipated mainstream achievements, this special and often insufficiently observed space testifies in its own way to the vitality of the modern Serbian novel.

Translated from Serbian by  
Jovanka KALABA

STEVAN TONTIĆ

## THE DEFENSE OF POETRY

THE INTERVIEW WAS LED BY RADMILA GIKIĆ PETROVIĆ

Stevan Tontić (December 30, 1946, Grdanovci near Sanski Most) completed his studies in philosophy and sociology in Sarajevo. Before the war, he was an editor at a publishing house. After many years of exile in Germany (1993-2001), he returned to Sarajevo, where he lived until May 2014, after which he settled in Novi Sad. After his debut work *Nauka o duši i druge vesele priče* (Sarajevo 1970), he published several poetry collections, among them: *Hulim i posvećujem* (Belgrade 1977), *Crna je mati nedjelja* (Belgrade 1983), *Sarajevski rukopis* (Belgrade 1993, 1998), *Blagoslov izgnanstva* (Banja Luka 2001), *Sveto i prokletno* (Novi Sad 2009), *Svakodnevni smak svijeta* (Belgrade 2013), *Hristova ljuda* (Belgrade 2017). He is the author of the novel *Tvoje srce, zeko* (Belgrade 1998) and the travelogue *Ta mjesto* (Zrenjanin 2018).

He compiled anthologies *Novije pjesništvo Bosne i Hercegovine* (Sarajevo 1990) and *Moderno srpsko pjesništvo – velika knjiga moderne Srpske poezije od Kostića i Ilića do danas* (Sarajevo 1991). The books of essays *Jezik i neizrecivo* and *Po nalozima poezije* were published as part of *Izabrana djela* (Sarajevo 2009).

He translated several books from German (“Miloš N. Đurić Award”) and together with V. Kalinke, he translated M. Crnjanski’s *Lirika Itake* into German. His works have been translated into several languages, and he has won the Šantić Award, Zmajeva Award, Kočić Award, Antić Award, the international award of the Sarajevo Poetry Days, the Dušan Vasiljev award, the Ljubomir Nenadović Award, the *Žička hrisovulja*, *Velike bazjaške povelje* and others. In Germany, he received the award of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, the award “Literature in Exile” of the city of Heidelberg and the “Rainer Kunze” award.

*Radmila Gigić Petrović: In the poem “Ne bih volio” you say that you would not like to go back to the “hell of the years of early adulthood”, when there was “the confusion of all senses”, at least when we speak about love. But still, how would you describe your childhood and early adulthood?*

*Stevan Tontić:* These are the words of the poetic voice remembering how hard it was to approach a girl for whom he yearned. I believe that most young boys that are just starting to experience the erotic drive know the feeling.

I was born as the youngest child of six, in a rural family who lived in the hills at the foot of the Grmeč mountain. My father was in the local resistance organization that fought Germans and *ustaša*.<sup>1</sup> He was literate; he read books and asked God, authorities, and people philosophical questions. My mother, like all her female peers from the village, was illiterate. Financially, we could manage relatively well. Life in the village was hard, but I fondly remember the landscape with spacious meadows and glorious Grmeč mountain to the southwest. The school was built and opened at the time when I started the first grade. When I finished the fourth grade, I left home to live as a subtenant in Luška Palanka, the place two hours' walk away, where I finished primary school. (At that time there were about 1000 students in it, but today, after the Serbian exodus from that area, there is no school at all.) Afterwards, I finished two grades of grammar school in Sanski Most, from where I moved to Prijedor and changed schools. Two years from then, I obtained a teacher's degree. I dreamt about being a poet and I used to publish my poems, which were a little vague. I also discovered alcohol. Then, to please my parents, I worked as a teacher in our village, and I finished the first year at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo. In the year of 1967, I went there to be a regular student. I spent my vacations in the village helping my household members in agricultural work, especially with harvesting.

Together with dozens of other Serbian villages in Podgrmeč, my village was burnt down at the end of the war in 1995.

*What did the year of 1968 mean for you and your generation?*

On the fifth of June, just two days after the Belgrade students, the students from Sarajevo also rose. I remember that morning, around eight o' clock, I shouted in the halls of the Faculty of Philosophy that

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<sup>1</sup> Croatian fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ustasa>)

“something must happen today!” The spirit of rebellion was in the air. And, indeed, there were massive student demonstrations that day on the streets of Sarajevo. In the city center, the police had to react and many people were beaten with batons. The riots lasted for several days; the politicians who came to the Faculty to calm us down were booed. Many of us were taken in for informative questioning, and slowly the protectors of the system managed to pacify the students, one by one. As for me, the need for subversive thinking and ironic commentary on social phenomena grew. At the beginning of the following year, which was 1969, I became the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper *Nasi dani*, whose third issue was forbidden by the Court, and the editorial board was replaced.

My second collection of poems was rejected by one publisher from Sarajevo in 1974 due to its “hostile” attitude towards socialism and self-government, as Belgrade professor M. I. B., the manuscript reviewer, found. I then included the incriminated poems in a new collection, which was quietly published in Novi Sad two years later. I only mention this to point out how the spirit of rebellion, which exploded in 1968, lived in that poetry. That was a year of instructive experience for me, both about freedom and repression.

*The Sarajevski rukopis collection was created between 1988 and 1993, but most of the poems were written during the war days of 1992. In some of those poems, you talk about minefields, grenades, snipers, and shells. For the readers of the Letopis, can you remember the origin of those poems and those days in Sarajevo?*

I reluctantly remember those days – it is the greatest tragedy, an incomprehensible historical horror in the life of the city itself and its inhabitants, and even in my life. A catastrophe with over ten thousand dead, with tens of thousands wounded. I have already called it an ontological shock somewhere. Equally, I can now say that was the ontological stupidity or madness of the political and military mind of Muslims (Bosnians) on the one hand, and the Serbian brothers on the other. The ontological stupidity of the Muslim leadership (in alliance with the Croats) was shown, first of all, in the declaration of independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina against the clearly expressed will of the Serbian people, and then in the revocation of signatures from Cutiller’s plan in Lisbon for the cantonization of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And the Serbian madness was shown in the three-and-a-half-year bombing of Sarajevo, which, among other things, turned the whole world against us. The world media fed their consumers with day and night horrific scenes of the destruction of the city, pictures and cries of people killed, wounded

and out of their minds... In the West, an extremely negative image of Serbian “barbarism” was created, thus justifying NATO’s “humanitarian” intervention and satanization of Serbs as “bad guys”. In the end, over a hundred thousand Serbs had to leave Sarajevo! And the number of Serbs killed in the city has not been reliably determined to this day.

And what could a lone poet do, when the Muslim authorities, on top of all, forced him to dig trenches on the demarcation line? He could only, under the constant threat of death, desperately defend his threatened human integrity, his fragile dignity, his language which by all means had to be true in its poetic reports from the pits of hell, from the heart of catastrophe. That language was his only potential proof for the future: that even in bad times, in a terrible place, he was and remained a man and (perhaps) a poet. Compared to that, everything else was unimportant.

Scenes from that horrible, nightmarish reality seemed to penetrate the poetic language on their own, and the poet did not have to make up anything. He just had to shape it properly, summarize it and formally tighten it, saving himself from falling apart. Even today (in his “second” life), he takes the fact that he remained alive as a sign of higher mercy or pure comedy. He believes it was his poetry that contributed to this; whatever that poetry was, no matter how vulnerable, it had healing powers, it had something indestructible in it.

*In Sarajevski rukopis, Mihajlo Pantić discovered the poetry “of eerie expressiveness and encapsulated emotional energy on the brink of bursting”. The book was awarded “Zmajeva nagrada” and was translated into several languages. In Germany, the book was published three times.*

As the editor of *Književne novine*, Pantić published 27 of those poems in a single edition. One girl, who was allowed to leave Sarajevo, smuggled them out for me in one of the convoys. That poetry indeed experienced tremendous success and helped its author survive. In 1994 I was a refugee in Germany; as such I was not allowed to leave the country and for that reason I was not present at *Zmajeva nagrada* ceremony.

*While you were in Sarajevo during the war, you received an invitation from the European Citizen’s Initiative Forum to attend an important convention in Paris. It seems that you did not go?*

For me and five or six other artists and intellectuals, the invitation came somewhere at the beginning of the summer of 1992. We waited for the flight to Paris for five or six days only to hear that our departure

from the war zone was not going to happen. The government did not allow such a trip, probably because they feared that we would never come back. At that moment, since nothing seemed to be trustworthy, I wrote a poem about that unsuccessful trip. In the poem I labeled the government, the United Nations, France and the whole Europe as “so-called”. After those five or six days of my absence my wife thought that I had already come back from Paris. For me, no one except her could be trusted anymore in the twisted and lying world.

*In the poem “Poruka misterioznog gelera” you write about what happened in one of Simon Wiesenthal’s books, which was displayed above your work desk. What is the mystery there?*

It is documentary-based poem in which I write down a dark-enigmatic “note” that shrapnel “told” just above my head. Penetrating the wall of the house, that piece of grenade cut from the ridge a part of the title of Wiesenthal’s book *Justice, not Revenge*, which was published in Sarajevo before the war. It cut, very precisely, the part of the title after the comma: *not Revenge*, while leaving the word *Justice* intact – for me to interpret the word “justice” in the way I thought was right.

My home library in Sarajevo was lost. When I was illegally leaving Sarajevo in mid-January of 1993, I could not take a single book.

*The Berlin period followed, and that period was marked by night phone calls with your wife who stayed in Belgrade after you left Sarajevo. What were you able to do in Berlin, how did you manage, and for how long did you stay there, far away from everything and everyone you cared for?*

With a few breaks (when I had a scholarship elsewhere), I spent a total of 8 years and 8 months in Berlin (from the beginning of May 1993 till the end of 2001). All that time I was not allowed to work, I received social assistance for about two years, and then I survived on fees for numerous literary performances, for texts and books translated into German, and from occasional scholarships. I also received two major literary awards, in Munich and Heidelberg. I moved a lot, and it was always a big problem to extend my residence visa. A really painful experience. But I also made some good friends and learned the language much better.

*On the covers of one of your books there is a reproduction of a coloured painting, whose author is your wife. You dedicated a lot of poems to her, and I remember the poem about a woman who is entirely*

*of this world and “so simple”, while the poetic voice in the poem is “undoubtedly a Platonist”. The poem is called Moja žena, and you listed it in your book of collected works.*

The anthology of collected and new love poems *Bezumni plamen* was published in 2015. In the last fifty years, I have dedicated a lot of poems to my wife, and therefore the anthology was embellished by her painting done in encaustic technique, which she began to practice about ten years ago. The poem *Moja žena* was not dedicated to her, it is about a simple yet exceptionally attractive woman. That is one of the early, a little bit quirky but very free-spirited poems.

*Does your poetry feature anything of Hannah Arendt’s opinions on the triviality of evil?*

In her report from the trial of Eichmann, the often-quoted thought about the banality of evil may not cover all forms of manifestation of it. If we are talking only about the classic mass killing of people, the most common methods of killing are really banal: a bullet to the back of the head, a knife at the throat, a hammer to the head. But let’s see what the German Nazis did: they showed an unheard-of criminal invention – let’s just take the invention of the crematorium that turned people into smoke! Here, their industry of death acquired such phantasmagoric dimensions that it is difficult to speak of the banality of such a historically unprecedented evil. Perhaps Hannah Arendt, under the banality of evil, meant the moral misery of such a murder.

My poetry could not close its eyes to all the evil of war it personally witnessed.

*In the postface of the second (Banja Luka) edition of your collection *Svakodnevni smak sveta*, your colleague Ranko Risojević wrote that the poetics that made you famous is “singing from the mud of life with an ironic outlook”.*

Critics and interpreters of my poetry have often emphasized its ironic disposition. Risojević knows me well, we have been reading each other’s work since our early years. But when that “mud”, the mud of criminal history, exceeded all measure, my irony, out of compassion for those killed and exiled, began to subside and retreat before the objective irony and cynicism of reality itself.

*In the poem Hristova luda from your latest collection of the same name, we also find these verses: “Since I was born, I do not ask/for how*

*long / nor where to / I am guided from above!" Who says that? How do your poems actually come about?*

These are the verses of a present-day follower of Christ who professes his faith with unreserved devotion. At the end of the song, he says: "... while enduring pain –I love. // And if I know anything, / With the knowledge that can make one go mad, / I know that Christ is hurting because of me". With those words coming from his mouth, I think he will be fine at Doomsday.

My poems are mostly created in unpredictable moments, in the wake of a certain idea that suddenly appears in my head. By the strength and persuasiveness of that initial phenomenon I can immediately sense whether something will happen or not. Then, either these initial few words immediately develop into a complete poetic form, or they wait for months, sometimes years, until the time comes for them to obtain a shape that is satisfactory. Although very rarely, I sometimes write three or four poems in one day, and then half a year passes without a single verse. I work on some of the longer poems for days and months, with countless repeated readings. Writing poetry is an unsystematic, anarchic activity that depends on the state of the soul and, of course, on the mood.

*In the collection Hristova luda, there is a small cycle of four poems about the philosopher Spinoza, as well as the cycle "Posvete pjesničkom plemstvu" which includes poems about Mandelstam, Pound, Andrić, Skender Kulenović, Popa, Miljković and Kiš, and some poets buried in Novi Sad city cemeteries. Conditionally speaking, are they your favorite interlocutors?*

Mostly them. Especially Andrić, Mandelstam, Popa, Miljković and Kiš. There are even two poems about Andrić, which differ from the others in that they are mainly composed of the words and sentences of that writer, and I have only arranged them into rhyming verses. The poem about Pound, whom I don't know well enough, was based on a photo of him in an iron cage for dangerous beasts, when the Americans arrested him as an advocate of Mussolini's fascism and transported him to America, where he ended up in a psychiatric hospital and nearly in an electric chair.

The cycle about Spinoza deals with his anathema (according to the original text of the anathema) and excommunication from the Jewish community, about which Skender Kulenović once published several sonnets. That is the reason why I dedicated one of the sonnets to Skender. By the way, Skender, Ćopić and myself share the same homeland under Grmeč.

*Who are those who “walk with their heads held high / and bent forever to ‘graze the grass’”?*

Some are proud, maladapted rebels, who often pay for such behavior with their lives, while others are submissive subjects, people without their own will and intelligence, who are easily manipulated by any government. There are many of them in our society as well.

*It is less well known that you also published two prose books. Two decades after the novel *Tvoje srce, zeko* (1998), the travelogue *Ta mjesto* appeared. Writing a travelogue – what was the pleasure for the poet?*

That book was written without a previous plan – I simply collected texts about the cities and countries that I had visited and written about for almost twenty years. I lived in some cities (Sarajevo and Berlin) for a very long time, I got to explore others during shorter stays (Jerusalem). Only the longest travelogue in the book was written with the intention of introducing the reader to what follows. There, I described in detail a one-day visit to my burned village, with memories of my youth, and I dedicated the text to the memory of Branko Ćopić. And pleasure? I will not hide it – just like you before me, I felt good at the “Ljubomir Nenadović” Award ceremony for that book, in the famous Brankovina.<sup>2</sup>

*In the eighties, and even later, there were debates and controversies about national and supranational literatures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At that time, how did you look at these demarcations, that is, the integration of the literature that was created there? Have you ever been in a dilemma as to which literature your literary works belong to?*

I have never been in doubt as to which literature my literary work belongs to. Many Serbian writers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including me, wrote in *ekavica*<sup>3</sup> in order to clearly indicate that they are not only Bosnian-Herzegovinian (where the nationality remains undetermined) but also Serbian authors. The term *Bosnian literature* was insisted upon by some Muslim professors and critics (fearing that national divisions in literature would lead to the division of the country itself),

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<sup>2</sup> A village in the municipality of Valjevo, Serbia. The entire Brankovina area was declared Historic Landmark of Great Importance in 1979. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brankovina>)

<sup>3</sup> The important linguistic feature of Serbian dialects which differentiates the Serbian dialects of the eastern part (*ekavica*) from those of the western part (*ijekavica*) of the entire linguistic area. Both these dialect groups became the basis for standard Serbian (*ekavica* and *ijekavica*) and standard Croatian language (*ijekavica*).

while most Serbian and even Croatian writers favored national names: Serbian, Croat and Muslim (Bosnian) literature. That is how the cultural integralism was overcome, although it still has its supporters today. However, I was not against the possibility of joint presentation of the literary works of the three nations of that republic, which is today an independent state. Along with the anthology *Moderno srpsko pjesništvo* (1991), the first Serbian anthology in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I also compiled the anthology *Novije pjesništvo Bosne i Hercegovine* (1990), in which I presented Serbian, Croatian and Muslim poetry separately in the preface. At the time, I talked about it with Svetozar Koljević and our views about it were same. By the way, for the publishing house *Svetlost*, and for the edition I led, Koljević had prepared an anthological selection from Serbian prose of the twentieth century in 30 books. Just when that was over, war broke out. And it all went downhill from there.

*It would be interesting for you to tell us something about your translation work. What is the first condition to start translating a poet – a commissioning or your own choice?*

Almost no one wants translations of poetry books. Everyone is just looking for novels. It seems that the editors of publishing houses are just waiting for the right moment to announce: “*We also have a novel up our sleeve!*” Poetry books are non-commercial, and no one publishes them without financial support, which is negligible in our country or does not exist or is provided by the poet himself. In the last ten years, I have been translating books by German poets, mostly with the support of the Traduki Foundation from Germany. I chose the authors I was translating. They were always big or significant names, like Peter Huhel, Günther Eich, Christoph Mekel, Richard Pitra, Uwe Kolbe or Jan Wagner.

Translating poetry is an excellent test of your own language skills, and a well-translated sonnet by a Shakespeare or Rilke can make you happy.

*Finally, by asking this question I will quote the title of a poem from your collection Crna je mati nedjelja: “And you? What are you doing?” What is Stevan Tontić doing now? Is he preparing something new? What is he preoccupied with?*

I am preoccupied, willingly or not, with the pathology of the society in which we live, the bad infinity of our in-depth transition to a better, enlightened and orderly society with responsible politics. How-

ever, in spite of everything, I read a lot, I travel occasionally, and by translating German poets I stay away (quite successfully) from writing my own things. But – recently, I have started collecting my essays, speeches and conversations on the topic of *the defense of poetry* for a Belgrade publisher. When times were bad, poetry was my defense, so, even with my limited strength, I would like to testify for it.

Translated from Serbian by

*Jovanka KALABA*

## UNSOUND FIRE BY STEVAN TONTIĆ

Stevan Tontić: *Bezumni plamen – izabrane i nove ljubavne pjesme [Unsound Fire: Selected and New Love Poems]*, SPKD “Prosvjeta”, Sarajevo, 2015

During the last (hopefully – *the last*) – civil war, Stevan Tontić was given an opportunity to go through it the hard way, in Sarajevo, in 1992–3: primarily through horror, the delusions and self-delusions of the city with a mixed population under shellfire, which included self-shelling for the purposes of propaganda and politics. It is by no means easy to say whether all this was harder or easier than the years which followed, in exile in Germany (1993–2001), where he had to experience, from a distance, the world with which he had until recently been closely related. Certainly, the following years of the so-called peace (2001–2014) that he spent in his (*his?* still?) Sarajevo were not lacking in interesting insights and experiences. Thereafter, since lately, he settled – (did he become settled, though?) – in Novi Sad. His verses from that period are an ‘extension’ of his earlier love poems, ‘intersecting’ with them, so that within the collection *Bezumni plamen* (*Unsound Fire*, 2015) they can all be observed as a poetic whole.

In the earlier – and even the recent – history of literature, this may not have been an entirely exceptional course of one’s life, generally speaking. Yet the significance of such a course and its maturation in the poet’s spiritual realm is reflected in every step through the collection of poems *Unsound Fire*. Thus, for instance, in the poem “Kalendar” (“Calendar”, 1993), when he mentions our feast days – “St. George’s Day, St. Vitus’ Day, St. Elijah’s Day and Dormition of the Mother of God” [“Đurđevdan, Vidovdan, Ilindan, i Veliku Gospojinu”]<sup>1</sup> – the feast days pregnant with great religious longings

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<sup>1</sup> Stevan Tontić, *Bezumni plamen – izabrane i nove ljubavne pesme*, SPKD “Prosvjeta”, Sarajevo, 2015, p. 28. In further references to this collection, page numbers are provided, bracketed, with the main text. – *Author’s note*.

as much as with historical associations – he remembers these within a single breath and broadly, from the immediate historical past:

I ran through the dark tunnels in bright months,  
through the feast days,  
like through minefields:  
shells, shells, shells,  
a sniper, a cannon and a stinger. (28)<sup>2</sup>

He adds then that in those tunnels – how's that! – he spotted neither “roses”, nor “blades of wheat”, nor “pine needles” in the “calendar’s nightmare”, yet he knew what awaited him:

It will snow tomorrow,  
At our doorstep,  
my darling.  
At our doorstep,  
Under the footprints – whose? (28)<sup>3</sup>

And, in the end, a foreboding and a question addressed to his “darling”:

A bitter winter is nearing,  
can you hear the squeak of combat boots? (28)<sup>4</sup>

Bearing in mind the present days, when the saints seem, for who-knows-which time, to have “placed” some “figures” “above Serbia, in the clear sky”, we are only left in wondering whether this poem still gives a hint of a small ray of light, since the question is addressed to the beloved person with whom the poet shares everything. And in the heart of the next poem, “Lice” (“Face”, 1993) – there exists a kind of glow in the shelled city in which the poet, “in the demolished apartment”, puts a door against “the sole unbroken window” so as to prevent glass from lunging into the face of his “little girl” and marring its

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<sup>2</sup> The quoted original verse is provided in footnotes so as to enable the reader to have an insight into the poet’s linguistic manner/artistry. – Translator’s note.

protrčah kroz mračne tunele svijetlih meseci,  
kroz praznike,  
kao kroz minska polja:  
granate, granate, granate,  
snajper, top i zolja.

<sup>3</sup> Sutra će snijeg,  
Na našem pragu,

draga.

Na našem pragu,  
Ispod koraka – čijih?

<sup>4</sup> Dolazi ciča zima,  
čuješ li škripu vojničkih čizama?

heavenly beauty,  
Which, I think, makes the sun rise. (29)<sup>5</sup>

[]

In other words, this collection brings love lyrics of an extraordinary source and voice/cry in the name of lifesaving beauty and love within the circumstances of not only those but also various other times in our history. As early as in the opening poem – “To Larisa from My Room” (“Larisi iz moje sobe”, 1970) – this is clearly suggested at a moment when the poet feels “the past time flourishing in my head”, that he is encircled by “dormant beasts for bullets confused”, and he asks his Larisa if it is her that “merges into herself” the “unprotected” him “like into the sea” (7). Is not one of the love miracles – from the afterworld and the earthly realm – discernible in the poem “Moja žena” (“My Woman”, 1977), too:

Being a Platonist  
I have a worldly woman. (9)<sup>6</sup>

Yet however real and unreal at the same time, that is a miracle one can even joke about:

It's as if she hits me with a mallet  
When she says I love you. (9)<sup>7</sup>

But does not this miracle become sinister when the poet “at one moment” sees “snow” in the “archetypal face” of his darling, a hint of the winter season.

That intertwining of historical time with one’s love experience is also suggested in the poem under an unusually prosaic title – “...a onda” (“...and then”, 1986). In the first line, a major political promise is invoked mockingly, one characteristic of the recent times and also – in a broader, figurative sense – for many others too, perhaps:

Communism, it seems, will not come the day after tomorrow,  
as my father was once told. (18)<sup>8</sup>

And in that, perhaps eternal, betrayal of political promises, there is hidden again the poet’s experience of love:

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<sup>5</sup> nebesku ljepotu,  
Radi koje, mislim, i sunce izlazi.

<sup>6</sup> Kao platoničar  
Ja imam ženu ovozemaljsku.

<sup>7</sup> Kao da me lupi maljem  
Kad kaže Volim te.

<sup>8</sup> Komunizam neće izgleda doći prekosutra  
kako je ocu mome rečeno bilo.

on a guillotine am I sleeping now  
And you're putting for me cushions underneath<sup>9</sup>

which is again, for one more time, “love’s business” in a harsh environment (18). As it also appears to be in the poem “A ti? Šta radiš ti?” (“And You? What Is It You Do?”) (1986):

a shower of your kisses pours on me –  
Stitches on the wounded man. (17)<sup>10</sup>

Even in the cases of change from non-metrical into metrical verse, in the poem “Ja što svoju dragu” (“I Who Drag My Darling”, 1993), some analogous scenes and side-thoughts emerge:

I who drag my darling away from the slaughter squares,  
and I who send out my deary to get drink from killers’ lairs;  
I who put on faces that left the earth with the deceased,  
and I who go through conditions never to be eased –  
(...) I’m digging a tunnel out of this world –  
And the afterworld’s scent will I catch. (34)<sup>11</sup>

For, again, like deceptive light at the end of the tunnel, like some personal trance within the severe environment, there will appear the Redemptrix of all that occurs in the lines which follow, too:

It is from there that she will dawn though set apart,  
and while trying our new future to guess  
I can hear: a black bullet is circling round her heart,  
so I close my eyes, and hold my breath. (34)<sup>12</sup>

To put it short: like in ordinary, everyday life, love emerges amidst all sorts of events as an afterworldly exit from the banality of endurance, like a ray shining upon the overall desert of transience. Perhaps because – above

<sup>9</sup> Ja ti na glijotini spavam

A ti mi podmećeš jastučiće,

<sup>10</sup> Tvoji poljupci pljušte po meni –

Zakrpe po ranjeniku.

<sup>11</sup> Ja što svoju dragu vućem sa trgova klanja,

i ja što draganu šaljem po piće kod ubica;

ja što uzimam na se nestala sa zemlje lica,

i ja što prolazim kroz neprolazna stanja –

(...) kopam tunel iz ovog svijeta –

Onaj će svijet meni da miriše.

<sup>12</sup> Otud sviče ona što nas rastaviše,

i dok našu novu sudbu odgonetam

čujem: oko srca joj crno zrno šeta,

pa sklopim kapke, i prestanem da dišem.

all and after all – the poet, possibly accompanied by the Reader, can in his daydream come to believe in his otherworldly lodestar:

The animals you lure, and caress on the doorstep,  
Think that you're immortal,  
As indeed you are. (36)<sup>13</sup>

Finally, does not the tradition of love poetry on the whole – with some tinges of the worldly transience and otherworldly desire that is born afresh out of its own ashes – echo through the exceptionally significant semblances in the *Unsound Fire* of Tontić's verse? Especially nowadays, when the ideals of people's mutual attachments imperceptibly keep vanishing as the value-related articulations of human lives, sinking into the indifference of electronic communication, often deprived of one's facial expression, the look of one's eyes, gestures that accompany words.

*Svetozar KOLJEVIC*

Translated from Serbian by  
*Angelina ČANKOVIĆ POPOVIĆ*

## THE HISTORY-FEEDING WRITER AND COMMENTARIES

Mihajlo Pantić, Ed.: *Okean Pekić [The Pekić Ocean]*, Biblioteka grada Beograda [Belgrade City Library], Beograd, 2020

There are several ways in which a contemporary cultural, artistic and literary community can do a good turn to authors on the occasions of their birth or death anniversaries. The three most popular ways, which have become customary over the most recent period, are commemorative/professional/scholarly and other gatherings which result in the publication of a collection of contributions dealing with the life and/or work of the author in question; thematic anthologies of fiction, verse or plays consisting of original output by the contemporary writers producing works in the spirit of that author; and, lastly, social activities which lead to the creation/installment of a monument/bust/pedestal/plaque(tte) or other memorials in the places which were important

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<sup>13</sup> Životinje koje vabiš, i na pragu miluješ,  
Misle da si besmrtna,  
Kao što i jesi.

to the author in his lifetime. In the case of Borislav Pekić – on the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary – two significant books have appeared in 2020: an anthology of short stories dedicated to the author [*Pre vremena čuda/ Preceding the Time of Miracles*, edited by Vule Žurić, published by Laguna, Belgrade] and the collection of writings titled *Okean Pekić* [*The Pekić Ocean*] edited by Mihajlo Pantić; in addition, there is a monument in Pekić's honour set up at Belgrade's *Cvetni trg* ('Flower Square') several years ago.

The said collection of writings has been published by the Belgrade City Library within the series *Vrhovi* ('Peaks') which has over the past years – also with Pantić as Editor – produced similar collections featuring Ivo Andrić, Miloš Crnjanski, Branko Ćopić, Branko Miljković, Svetlana Velmar-Janković, Duško Radović, Milorad Pavić and Danilo Nikolić, yet also our contemporaries such as David Albahari, Dušan Kovačević and Dragoslav Mihailović. In short, this series and its editor have invested efforts to present to the readership of today the most representative names in the Serbian literature of the last and this century. The list has been extending constantly, but it is clear why Borislav Pekić has appeared to be an obligatory choice. However, it is important to point out that the collection about him does not merely include writings of classical scholarly, essayistic, biographical, critical or interpretative character; there is a visible tendency to fuse all approaches to the analysis of this author, whereby – quite rarely for the collections of similar type – greater attention has been given to the biographical than to the creative aspect. Expectedly enough, there are some contributions which spotlight some of the insufficiently read segments of Pekić's extremely rich oeuvre, but – considering the fact that this author has enjoyed a truly substantial reception – the included contributors gave their minds not to analyses of his prose and dramatic works but rather to some less-known details of his life history. As his life equalled his bibliography in abundance, the material they could reckon with provided sufficient space for them to write diverse contributions which are continuations of the others so that – in the end – they make up a fragmentary yet easy-to-read, informative and slightly novelized biography of Pekić himself.

Following the introductory contribution by Srdjan Cvetković, which is also the longest one in the collection *The Pekić Ocean*, one that mingles the biographical and the interpretative, there are several groups of writings which tend to establish a proposal for a fresh reading of this classic of Serbian twentieth century literature. Most of these are based on an anecdotal approach to personal experiences of friendship or acquaintance with Pekić, and the majority of the contributors write about how, where, why and under what circumstances they met the author and spent time with him. Those were most often visits to his London home, but the ways of describing these offered by Predrag Palavestra, Dušan Puvačić, Vida Ognjenović, Vladeta Janković and Radoslav Bratić differ to a great extent. Some of these people only focus on the time they spent with Pekić and his family in England, others spotlight

their conversations with Pekić on various subjects, while the writers of the third group make comparisons of his life before leaving Yugoslavia with the later period. On the other hand, the contributions by Nataša Mijušković, Dragoslav Mihailović, Gojko Božović, Pantić himself and others, deal with the respective relationships they built with this author in Belgrade, and those he built with other outstanding persons of his generation, ranging from Danilo Kiš, Filip David and Mirko Kovač to Slobodan Selenić, Bora Čosić etc.; thereby, they indicate Pekić's most distinct traits which used to be equally noticeable in the time before he left his motherland and much later, when he repeatedly came here, in the years toward his death.

The third cluster of writings in *The Pekić Ocean* is based on the contributors' correspondences with the author, and his letters are to a greatest extent made topical by Djordje Lebović and Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, since – bearing in mind the clear-cut influence of correspondence as form in Pekić's non-fiction output – these letters reveal a new dimension of his character, his approach to creative devices, commitment to his own work, yet also the witnesship which adorned his personality. Moreover, the collection contains some writings dealing with Pekić's work as dramatist, and these contributions add an extra value to it – not only because they reveal the manner in which he harmonized his style of articulation in fiction with those in scriptwriting and dramatic ones, and also the ways in which these two passions of his were intertwined, but also because they unveil the attitudes of directors, dramaturgs, cameramen, actors and other artists who rendered his words through footage, radio-waves or the theatre stage. Finally, the last group of contributions, including, among others, those by Charles Simic and Radivoj Radić, reveals the occasional minor artistic triumphs achieved by Pekić's works today and the attitude of the contemporary public to the writings which raised generations of readers and which are still, in our time, considered to be the most representative examples of their respective forms and genres.

Each of the contributors to the collection defines Pekić in a different way, depending on the angle of vision (s)he observes him from and the viewpoint from which (s)he reads his/her memories of the man. He thus appears as a close friend, a fellow-fighter on the literary field for many years/decades, an incidental acquaintance, a colleague in the profession or a figure observed with respect and esteem. However, one of the precise descriptions of the author's work and approach to writing is provided by the editor of the issue who says that Pekić was a "history-phage writer" who, unlike the authors relying on a historical model or crossing into the domain of historical meta-fiction – and Pekić belonged to both categories – has a quite specific attitude to history: for, his creative mechanism views the material of history as something which can 'devour' and recycle its jumble so as to create "a novel, literary entity, mostly a tragic picture of human existence". Therefore, the writers of this kind do not treat history as a sacrosanct fact which guides their current

age, or some material which is – being full of untruths and dubiousness – suitable for reinterpretation, but see history as material they can process, read and analyze in order to detect some space for aesthetic treatment and a fresh approach to what has been known since before. That is how Pekić sees the history of his native country, and of England as well: as a ‘territory’ imposed on him which he had to accept as one of his own, in that specific way, choosing distinguished people who could motivate him to create some new, fictional characters and realms, emphasizing invariably the tragic and fatal effect of history upon the new generations. It is in that key that – including *Zlatno runo* [*Golden Fleece*] and *Kako upokojiti vampira* [*How to Quiet a Vampire*] underscored by Mihajlo Pantić – other works by Pekić can be read as well, which could lead to some fresh and valuable interpretations of his oeuvre.

As *The Pekić Ocean* borders on the essayistic, the scholarly, the critical and the anecdotal, the collection may prove appealing and interesting to various categories of readers, ranging from those who delve into studies in the author’s life and work to those who simply enjoy his works neglecting additional analyses and interpretations. Likewise, each reader of Pekić will be able to find here something that can trigger some further quests and research, whether it be some lesser known parts of his oeuvre or some bibliographical items related to that oeuvre, and that will certainly contribute to an even better contemporary reception of the works by Borislav Pekić.

Dragan BABIĆ

Translated from Serbian by  
Angelina ČANKOVIĆ POPOVIĆ

## EULOGY TO THE INSPIRATIONAL PRINCIPLE

Zlata Kocić, *Galgal*, Narodna biblioteka “Stefan Prvovenčani” [Stephen the First-Crowned Public Library], Kraljevo, 2020

The latest book of poetry by Zlata Kocić will draw your attention even before you open it – by its enigmatic title, *Galgal*. The epigraph taken from *The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* does not tell much about the features of that term, although it does single out its basic meaning. Therefore, here is a broader interpretation of the title motif from a recent autopoeitic record by the poetess:

The prophet Ezekiel saw the cherubim full of eyes not only on their bodies but also on – the wheels. The wheels of the cherubim, as seen by Ezekiel,

move in all directions, horizontally, at an angle, upward, downward: *whither the spirit was to go, they went...*<sup>1</sup> The seer more closely describes them as a wheel in the midst of a wheel. In the original Aramean, like in Hebrew, their name is *galgal*. A word of multiple meanings. Wheel, whirlwind, swirl, revelation. In Serbian, it has been translated as *kolo*, the Russian translation uses the original *galgal*, with an asterisk and translated as whirlwind, swirl.

Further in her text, the poetess finds a correlate to Ezekiel's *galgal* in the motif of the *eye*, which is of crucial significance for the thematic/semantic configuration of her extraordinary book:

The iris of the eye and the pupil within it – is that not a wheel in the midst of a wheel; is not the eye itself a “*galgal*” of our soul? The look itself – does not it move wherever you want, not in space only but in time, too: hither and thither! And an encounter of looks, like the journeys of the souls, the sparkling word of love – can be neither imagined nor depicted as a line, for they are at least three-dimensional. Those are live flying little orbs, tingling, pulsating hearts. An eye which does not speak yet tells and loves – that is our ‘*galgal*’ flight.

However, the adventure of *reading* this poem by Zlata Kocić, developed in a symphony-like way, could be supported by two *a priori* bits of information on its chief motif. The first one concerns the appearance, role and notion of the cherubim in the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, which informs us – through Moses – that the Lord, having driven out the man, “placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubim, and a flaming sword” (*Genesis*) to keep away of the *tree of life*, that the cherubim were embroidered on the curtains at the entrance into the Tabernacle (*Exodus*) and later also described in another version of *Ezekiel* taken over in *John* (the Gospel) and *Revelation*, as well as in *Kings* where we find that “the Lord sits as King above the Cherub angels” and, in the same book, that the two Cherubim made of gilded cedarwood stood in front of the Arc of the Covenant in Solomon’s Temple. Within the triadic order of the celestial hierarchy, according to the book *On the Celestial Hierarchy* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, the Cherubim are – in addition to the Seraphim and Thrones – the most immediate prop to the obviously hypermobile Celestial Throne. In the same, fundamental source, “the name Cherubim denotes their power of knowing and beholding God, their receptivity to the highest Gift of Light, their contemplation of the Godhead in Its First Manifestation, and that they are filled by participation in Divine Wisdom, and bounteously outpour to those below them from their own fount of wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The English quotations from the Bible in this essay have been taken over from *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, First Ballantine Book Edition, The Random House Publishing Group, New York, 1991. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>2</sup> The English citation has been taken over from the digital edition (prepared by Joseph H. Peterson in 2004) of the book *The Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius*

For that reason, they [the cherubim] are, logically enough, covered with countless eyes all over their winged bodies, with an organ of divine seeing power, which, as a means of unpredictably swirling movements use the *galgal* that particularly fascinates the poetess and grows not into an obsessive but into the absolute motif of her latest book. But with her first book of verse in mind –*Klopka za senku (A Trap for the Shadow)* from the now remote year 1982 – that is, thinking of the narrative dynamism of that long poem in two voices wherein the all-encompassing, and especially recent, historical developments in the broad national territory are sung of as an incessant swirling flow with an undertone of cosmic events, both along the primary subject line and the burden line alike (“The eagles stay close to the waist / between the darts of the Sun / flying around the liver. // Yellow spots circulate in the horizons / along the serpentine paths around the burning heights”;<sup>3</sup> “He [the guslar, Prometheus, the Fugitive? – M. P.] was spun atop the tree of Eden / as high as up to the goddesses and idols / fanning the fire in his legs”;<sup>4</sup> “The blinded young and old / keep circling round while breaking the earthen bread”;<sup>5</sup> or: “And the eagles circle around / and the lightnings hit / the men are lined up / and their daughters taken away / and the sun stabs through / and the Earth bursts into sobs / and the ring of the kins / never breaks never breaks”;<sup>6</sup> “Spin O wheel, do spin / all the way to the life’s end (...) // Spin O wheel, do spin / back and away from the life’s end”<sup>7</sup>), or, if we bear in mind some particular ‘galgal’ motifs at several points (“The chariot ready ashore / The wheels larger than the Sun”;<sup>8</sup> “She’s running to the third grade / down the street of unknown heroes // To overtake the sneers of her peers / to catch the pace of the bagel / rolling ahead and around her / like a fifty pence like a kick-scooter / like a ducat like a princely crown”<sup>9</sup>), we can be convinced that the galgal-theme and galgal-idea in the verse of Zlata Kocić are not merely a gradual, fascinating

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*the Aeropagite*, translated from the Greek with commentaries by the Editors of The Shrine of Wisdom, The Shrine of Wisdom, Fintry, Brook Nr.Godalming, Surrey, England, 1935. – *Translator’s note.*

<sup>3</sup> The original quoted verse is provided in footnotes throughout the essay so as to enable the Reader to have an insight into the poet’s linguistic artistry. As to the translation of the verse into English, it mainly focuses on the meaning, imagery and figures of speech – at the expense of rhymes where they occur and the metre, regrettably. – *Translator’s note.*

*Orlovi se drže pojasa / između sunčevih strela / obleću jetru. // Žute mrlje kolaju horizontima / serpentinama oko ognjenih visova.*

<sup>4</sup> *Zavrtela ga uvrh krošnje rajske / do samih božica i kumira / raspirila mu vatrū u nogama*

<sup>5</sup> *Staro mlado zaslepljeno / vrti se u krug lomeći zemljani kolač*

<sup>6</sup> *I orlovi kruže / i gromovi zgode / i postroje muže / i kćeri odvode / i sunce probode / i zemlja zarida / a kolo se rode / ne kida ne kida*

<sup>7</sup> *Vrti, vrti kolo / dovrти do smrti (...) // vrti vrti kolo / Odvrti od smrti.*

<sup>8</sup> *Spremne čeze na obali / Točkovi veći od sunca*

<sup>9</sup> *Trči u treći razred / ulicom neznanih junaka // Da prestigne podsmeha vršnjaka / da uhvati korak s Devrekom / zakotrljanim pred njom oko nje / kao petobanak kao romobil / kao ducat kao kruna prinčeva*

discovery of a latter stage of her poetic output but – to a great extent – an inherent pattern of her *poetry and thought* in terms of content, form and poetics.

The rather lengthy poem *Galgal*, another condensed lyrical ‘composition’ by Zlata Kocić, consists – like its ‘twin’ *Grumen* (*Lump*) – of three large sections with three lyrical cycles each, but the latter cannot be discussed within the designated categories of genre. (Besides, *Lump* counts ten lyrical cycles.) The poetic speech in *Galgal* opens and flows in a contrapuntal interlacing of singing about the doubled archetype of the title motif, “galgal – fire-orb and cross-wheel” and “the pupil in the iris: wheel within wheel”. Thereby, a change in the poetic inspiration and transition of the artist’s focus from the sphere of the celestial-cosmological-spiritual to the sphere of the earthly-anthropological-psychical (with some tentative digressions) takes place through mostly broad outlines of the subject of lyrical cycles, but here and there within single accomplishments as well. However, in that varied dynamism it always seems that one and the same purpose is borne in mind, which is fulfilled – revitalisation of the liturgical impression of the most spiritual part of *Izhe Cheruvimi*, that is, multiplication of “the moment when Heaven and Earth combine”, or, as is said in the triptych-prologue “*Galgala*”: “It is only for the sake of producing, above, / a new rhythm, and making the heavens leap, / and the orbs, from everywhere, be in soft robe / clad in the music of the spheres”.<sup>10</sup>

It is exactly in that rhythm of counterpoint between individual poems that “The Galgal Eye” (“*Galgal oko*”) opens, the initial lyrical cycle of the first larger section of the composition which – in a well thought out manner – begins with the triptych “The Word” (“*Slovo*”) in the original sense of the Logos, the Providence: “Set to roll across the heaven, / the fiery word need not wait for dawn. / It is given soft light and a fearsome lighting / by the word in its bosom. And also the eyes, / while sprouting in the swirl, / give off fireflies / in four directions.”<sup>11</sup> In the closing part of this tryptich, the poetess transfers the determinant spiritual quality of the Cherub to his mobile base, the “galgal”: “How much more sight are they poured onto, whirling / by the ankle at the feet, like milk to the breast feeder / by the galgal – fire-orb and cross-wheel / itself filled with eyes”;<sup>12</sup> in the very next poem, “*Galgal Sector*” (“*Galgal isečak*”), introducing the character of The Mortal in her lyrical tale, she discovers in his eyes a correlation to the wondrous biblical motif and opens the perspective of thematizing his limitless polysemy: “How come a single word embraces / the circle, the ring, the wheel and the chariot, / the whirlwind, the swirl, but not the waterspout / over the sea, and the rotation, and the crown of it all: /

<sup>10</sup> *To je samo zato da se iznad zbude / novi ritam, i nebesa poskoče, i kugle, odasvud, nežnim ruhom / obavije muzika sfera*

<sup>11</sup> *Zakotrljana nebom, / ognjena reč ne mora da čeka osvit. / Svetli joj blaga, seva strašna / vest u prsima. A i oči, / dok u kovitlanju niču, / svice razašilju / na četiri strane*

<sup>12</sup> *Koliko li još vida, vitlanjem / uz gležanj nožni, doliva im, kao dojilji mleka, / galgal – žar-šar točak, / i sam pun očiju*

the revelation!? All of these / inside a single / word. The twosome: Galgal. // –Well, clearly. Like in your two / charming eyes under the eyebrows raised / accomodate both heaven and earth – responds The Celestial”.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, what the eye of man can see, and what is mirrored in it, has become not an equal but the privileged subject of the poem. And those are – the inner, emotional whirls of the rather abstract lyric character and the diverse motifs of his experience from reality. Both the former and the latter are considerably close to the spiritual and existential obsessions of the poet’s voice. And in the first lyrical cycle, the poem “The Drop” (“Kaplja”) with the frequently varied motif of the trimmed plane trees in the verse of Zlata Kocić, the voice takes us in the wake of the latter, while in the next two poems it seems that the well-known saying *The eyes are the mirror of the soul* is documented poetically: “We know a man by his eye. (...) Yes. We know a man by the children’s rooms in him”<sup>14</sup> (“Guest Room”/“Gostinska”); “Soundlessly, invisibly does the soul act. / There is neither a breather, nor a substitute in sweating. / Its golden vibe, tested in fire, / measures the run-ups, the flaming burst-outs / of the body. And those of its own. To get wings for all, (...) / On which – we’d head to the azure, to the sight intact. / Without blind crawling, without traps for moles. / Solely by the return flight of the bees.”<sup>15</sup> (“The Flight”/“Let”). That “return flight of the bees” is a rewarding homecoming, which here symbolizes the return of a “washed”, purged, fulfilled-in-life soul back to the Lord, its pristine source. However, the return is not possible unless prepared meticulously, and what is to be prepared are the “fire and tranquility in proportion”: “As long as there’s a place to make a home in – in the heart, / and a place to soar toward, into the viewpoint – the eye: / a nest, otherworldly, made of the Sun’s straws”.<sup>16</sup> There we have, simultaneously, a work both contemplative and poetic(al), which persuasively supports the religious-creative idea of the poetess that “the eye is the ‘galgal’ of the soul”. Imbued with the religious/spiritual subject matter of the highest order, the forthcoming lyrical cycles of the first section – “The Live Pillar”/“Živi stub” and the initial part of the closing cycle in the same section of the composition, “Big and Little Dipper” (“Velika i Mala kola”)<sup>17</sup> stand in correlative counterpoint to the other

<sup>13</sup> –*Kako to u jednu reč stanu / i krug, i kolo, točak, i kolesnica, / vihor, kovitlac, aline, pijavica / morska, i samo okretanje, i krunsko: otkrivenje!?* Sve to – u jednu / reč. Dvoreč: Galgal. // – Tako, lepo. Kao što u dva tvora / lepa oka pod vđetama dignutim / smeste se nebo i zemlja – uzvraća nebesnik.

<sup>14</sup> Čoveka po oku poznamo. (...) // Da. Čoveka poznamo po dečjim sobama u njemu.

<sup>15</sup> Nečijno, nevidljivo posluje duša. / Predaha nema, ni u znoju zamene. / Zlatni njen titraj, u vatri kušan, / zatele premerava, suktaje plamene / tela. I svoje. Svemu krila naći, (...) / Kojim – u lazur bismo, vidu nenačetom. / Bez bauljanja naslepo, bez krtičjih zamki. / Jedino pčelinjim, povratnim letom.

<sup>16</sup> Sve dok ima gde da se skući – u srcu, / i kud da usprhne, u vidikovac – oko: gnezdo, neovdanje, od sunčevih slamki.

<sup>17</sup> The Serbian word *kola* (‘cart’, ‘wheels’) from the names of these two constellations fits into the context of the wheels, chariots and the like, described in

poems within “Big and Little Dipper”, and also to all three poetic cycles in the central section of the composition, when presenting the heavenly and the earthly aspects of the chief motif. All of the poems in “The Live Pillar” pertain to Christological topics, and the first three (“Chiton”/“Hiton”, “Cedar”/“Kedar”, and “Grapes”/“Grozd”) are based on an Early-Christian, obviously Georgian legend (judging by the appearance of the lyrical heroines Nina and Sidonia) about a mysterious manifestation of Christ’s supernatural power; the rest of the poems in “The Live Pillar” produce an impression of the transcendental effect of the icon of “Jesus Christ Blinking”: “Thy closed eyes / are two cradles, of the rainbow, there are in them two / momently assembled realms: the upper and the lower ones. / Open eyes are the realms disassembled: the Holy Eight, of the Rainbow, the one of the Covenant. / Nesting in our irises. / Two little galgals?”<sup>18</sup> (“Rainbows, Irises”/“Duge, dužice”). (As to this “Holy Eight” and the similar visual symbols of some eschatological representations of the Eighth Day, the Upper City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, like the mathematical infinity symbol – Zlata Kocić never fails to build these into the composition wherever she spots them, whether it be in a natural or a virtual form.) What is thematized in the four-part poem “Links” (“Beočuzi”) from the cycle “Big and Little Dippers”, are diverse sacred art images of the central motif in the medieval fresco art of the monasteries of Gračanica and Visoki Dečani, of Russian churches and Russian iconography. With the exception of the icons, those are mostly the motifs of Cherubim *pars pro toto*, rendered in various combinations of winged wheels: “(...) Like magma, it is fed into mortar / by the painter’s whisper. (...) / Having impressed in advance on the vault / a link with a wing. There, it’s soaring.”<sup>19</sup>

Finally, a cut is made with the poem “Zemnik: nisam li i ja kotur?” (“The Mortal: Am I Not a Wheel, Too?”), for the archetypal galgal is identified in the human figure that performs a gymnastic exercise called *zvezda* (‘star’):<sup>20</sup> “Is it / really me, from head to toe / in that triple star / rolling above the soul-imbued / grass”.<sup>21</sup> This turnabout continues and extends into a couple of content-streams through all of the three poetic cycles in the central section of the composition. As early as in the cycle “Razgali-točak” (“Hearten-Wheel”<sup>22</sup>), the poet’s voice from The Mortal’s perspective begins to bifurcate.

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the previous passages. The imagery in English here can only be related to Big Dipper, for one of its synonyms is ‘Wagon’. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>18</sup> *Tvoje sklopljene oči / dve su kolevke, dugine, dva su u njima / nakratko sklopljena sveta: gornji i donji. / Oči otvorene jesu rasklopljeni svetovi: / sveta Osmica, Dugina, zavetna. / Svijena nam u dužice. Dva malena galgala?*

<sup>19</sup> (...) *Kao što magmu u malter / ušaptavao je živopisac. (...) / Unapred otisnuvši na svodu / beočug s krilom. Eno, lebdi.*

<sup>20</sup> Salto sideward. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>21</sup> *Jesam li / zaista to ja, od glave do pete / u toj trostrukoј zvezdi / zakoturanoj nad oduševljenom / travom.*

<sup>22</sup> Kindly notice the ‘-gal-’ piece in the Serbian version of the title that carries the emboldening, heartening meaning of the verb *razgaliti* (which can also be read

On the one hand – and that is suggested in the common title – brightening up occurs and the ultimate broadening of the spatial-temporal horizon of the poetess, as well as a transition from anthropological to historical-cultural subject matter (the poems: “Singi-vidik”/“Singi-View”, “Singi-stolpnik”/“Singi-Stylite”,<sup>23</sup> “Hearten-Wheel”, “Pun krug”/“Full Circle”, “Gala ušće”/“Gala Confluence”). Yet in the last of the just-mentioned poems, the issue of anthropo-cultural identity is revived, though: “Uninclusion around: / unsights, untouches. / We’re soaring, forgetful of where and who we are. (...) / Who am I? / Who are you? / a sleeper subterranean or a wanderer in heavens, / a pedestrian in the seas or a strayer in galaxies? / May we not dress the pegasus, but a donkey foal, white in the chest – we shall. In a low voice. / The dumb singer, the Rooster, / from the ruinous roof, of the Babel-Tower. / A gallus, of blood and feathers. / Its clay, or tin pseudonym<sup>24</sup> is: / Gaul”.<sup>25</sup>

However, rather than the anthropological identity of The Mortal, this is about the cultural/traditional identity of two different poetic voices and a kind of tension between them: cultural, poetic, emotional? For, the motif of Galus – in the senses of the ethnonym Gaul, the zoonym rooster, the roof weather-cock and, finally and symbolically, the poet – occurs also in some other poems with another and a different motivation, but it is additionally found in the same meaning, in an almost quarrelsome tone, in the first poems of the next cycle titled “Srčani kovitlac”/“The Whirlwind of the Heart” (“Neznani Galus”/“An Unknown Galus”, “Limeni brat”/“Tin Brother”). But let us go back to the above-said first poems of the cycle “Hearten-Wheel”. In these, beginning with the initial one, the poetess sets out in the wake of [the poet Miodrag] Pavlović, taking her nameless epic/lyric hero up to the viewpoint of the Belgrade Fortress, at the same time concretizing him in terms of geography and culture by evoking *the Feast for the Ages* of a kind in his native region: “The Singi fort and the city warm to thy ancestry, / whiter than the ashes. Filling thy mouth with the scripts / of Vinča.<sup>26</sup> By the beautiful blue whirls, / dancing

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as ‘division of the gal’; cf. the ‘bifurcation’ at the end of this sentence). The same piece is also found in the upcoming title “Gala Confluence”. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>23</sup> *Singi* is a Celtic word which probably (there is no general consensus about it) meant ‘circle’. In the time of the Celtic tribe of Skordisci the present-day Belgrade was named *Singidunum* (*dunum* meaning ‘fortress’). Another theory claims that the Singi were a Dacian tribe part of which were sent to the confluence of the Sava and the Danube in AD 62-63. And “Gala” can be taken to refer to the Galatians/Gauls, Gallic-speaking Celts. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>24</sup> This refers to the traditional home chimneys on which, for ventilation purposes, cowls were made of clay or tin in the form of a rooster which would rotate in the wind. – *Translator’s note*.

<sup>25</sup> *Neobuhvat naokolo: nedogledi, nedodiri. / Lebdimo, zaboravili i gde smo i ko smo. (...) / Kos am, ko si? / spavač podzemni i skitnica nebeska, / pešak pomorski i galaktički zalutnik? / Nek i ne timarimo pegaze, ali pule, / u prsima, belo – da. Tihim glasom. / Nemušti pevač, Pevac, / sa rušnoga krova, Vavil-kule. / Galus, od krvi i perja. / Glineni, limeni pseudonim: / Gal.*

<sup>26</sup> Vinča/Danube script refers to a set of untranslated symbols found on the Neolithic artifacts from the Vinča culture in Central and Southeastern Europe. It is named

waltz with the fish-eyed ancestors,<sup>27</sup> / it takes you to the sunny waters of the black seas.”<sup>28</sup> (“Singi-View”)

The title poem of the cycle invites all to get on the panoramic wheel of the nearby funfair, appealing for a general disentanglement of the soul from history: “Now, now, into the last effort: all to the funfair, / humans and beasts – all to the huge, look-look, / hearten-wheel: that of the fairies or of Babylon. / While the Sun itself circumvolves it, while still / installing rays between the spokes, untie / your agelong vertigoes: from the wheels / that fly whatever has burdened the soul – / splash it out, at the top of your voice.”<sup>29</sup> In a considerable number of poems, all three central cycles (“Gal-glasovi”/“Gal-Voices”, “Pogled u oči”/“A Look in the Eyes” – from “Hearten-Wheel”, “Galeta”/“Galette” – from “The Whirlwind of the Heart”, “Šal”/“Shawl” and “Galgal gora”/“Gilgal Mount” – from “Vrtuna”/“The Twister”) the very meaning of the word *gal* as the root of the two-word *galgal* and its derivatives in the numerous languages from Portugal to the biblical Mount Gilgal and Lake Baikal in Central Asia – is elaborated ‘vocally’ to the last breath. Within that whirl of opposite and totally unexpected meanings, the depiction of the galgal motif in the etymological and morphological context of the Indo-European and, partly, Semitic language family actually provides justification for the whole erudite-ludic endeavour.

In “Arhi-točak” (“Arch-Wheel”) and “Krilato klupko” (“The Winged Wheel”), the first two cycles of the closing section, the lyrics emerge from an anthropological and, generally, earthly perspective celebrating the archetypal motif of the galgal-revelation. In the former, the mellifluous, lively rhythm of the flexibly rhymed octosyllabic verse glorify the fire and the flame, the “burning fervour” in the eyes of the persons in love. However, as a gift from the heavenly “arch-wheel”: “the galgal fire on the backstage (...) / recognizes the eye by love – / inserts sight into the arch/sight”.<sup>30</sup> From the light, fluttering celebration of the galgal fire in the infatuated heart/eye, there is a transition in the next cycle to a condensed poetic speech of the broadest sweep of the same, carefully disarticulated subject matter. Catenated into one whole series of triptychs – not by chance but in analogy to the previous cycles of verse – in

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after the archeological site at Belgrade’s suburban settlement of Vinča. – *Translator’s note.*

<sup>27</sup> This is a reference to the prehistoric figurines from 7000 BC, found at the arheological site of Lepenski Vir (*vir* means ‘whirl’) on the Danube, downstream from Belgrade. – *Translator’s note.*

<sup>28</sup> *Singi utvrđenje i tvome rodu grad ogrejani, / od pepela belji. Usta ti puni spisima / vinčanskim. Virovima te lepim plavim, / u valceru s precima ribookim, / u sunčane vode mora crnih odvodi.*

<sup>29</sup> *De, u napor završni: svi u luna-park, / ljudi i zveri – svi u golemi, gle-gle, / razgali-točak: vilinski, vavilonski li. Dok obrće ga sunce lično, dok još / među žbice zrake umeće, razvezujte / vekovne vrtoglavice svoje: iz kolutova / letećih sve što duši natežalo je – / ispljusnite, na sav glas.*

<sup>30</sup> *galgal oganj iza scene (...) / pozna oko po ljubavi – / vid u arhi-vid udene*

the sign of the symbolic number of eight poems, that statement, in terms of the content, keeps moving upward: from “the circulation of water in nature” and extraordinary moments in childhood days, via some homelike cosy and external motifs from the current family life, “behind the peacock’s shrub”, a study of the human face with accentuated eye and mouth, *ascent-descent into one’s heart*, to the crystal ball (“granite” herein) in the hand of the Saviour of the World (as “Infant” here), and the galgal itself, the winged wheel, that is, “the imperial bird”. Recognizing, in the natural circulation of water “that whirl, / that winged coil, the galgal, in which rotation / equals revelation”<sup>31</sup> (“Vodeni točak”/“Water Wheel”), and, in the human heart, “the crossroads befitting the wheels, the winged ones”<sup>32</sup> (“Puno srce”/ “The Eager Heart”), in the eyeball – just like in the orb of “the Infant”, “the suburb of the celestial city” (“Kugla, mehur, vihor”/ “The Ball, The Bubble, The Whirlwind”), the poetess elevates you – but only and always on the wings of love, with her pure and eager heart – to the topmost spiritual tablelands of “absolute peace” and bliss of infinitude. The last cycle of the third section in this composition, titled “Os” (“Axis”), has a mere three poems of fewer syllables and offers a kind of an epilogue, that is, a semantic point of the whole megapoem. The first of these, “Činela” (“The Cymbal”), underlines the idea of harmony; the second one, “Čigra” (“The Whirligig”), spotlights “the whirl of stardust”<sup>33</sup> as the very principle of existence; the third bears the title of this cycle and, as the conclusive poem of the grand composition, promotes the ideal of all-encompassing love. The imaginary axis, just like the mill axis as its model, is the one which mutually and vertically connects the two worlds, the axis of love which permeates and propels “the upper wheel and the lower one”, the heavenly and the earthly, the godly and the human, the spiritual and the psychical. And we could also read it as an anagram<sup>34</sup> – salt: love as the salt of life. The power which at the same time propels life and fills it with purposefulness – happiness, beauty and joy; joyfulness in good, then good in joyfulness.

And, finally, regarded in retrospect, *Galgal* by Zlata Kocić takes the form of a grand, polyvalent ode to love, inspired by a highly sacred motif of the Judeo-Christian tradition and correlative anthropological insights of a proven religious spirit of an artist. Unlike *Lazareve lestve* (*The Ladder of Lazarus*) and *Belo pule* (*The White Donkey Foal*), dominated by the drama of man’s otherworldly lot, salvation and redemption from two aspects, *Galgal* – through the mutually intersecting anthropological and theological perspectives – sings about the divine spark of love as a vital force and a superior,

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<sup>31</sup> kovitlac taj, / klupko to krilato, galgal, u kome okretanje / jednako je otkrivenju

<sup>32</sup> raskrsnicu po meri točkova, krilatih

<sup>33</sup> kovitlac zvezdanog praha

<sup>34</sup> Os means ‘axis’, and so means ‘salt’, or, metaphorically, ‘essence’. – *Translator’s note.*

spiritual measure of human existence, whereby the eschatological horizon of the preceding long poems by Zlata Kocić is equally dramatically implied with equal drama. Therefore, the poetess this time relies on doubtless gifts of intuition and artistic invention rather than addicting herself to illogical penetrations of imagination like in the best moments of her earlier poetic creation. What noticeably prevails in this new lyrical-religious poem by Zlata Kocić is actually a truly authentic idea of the artist – over the unexpected resourceful leaps of autonomous poetic speech, accompanied by consistent and persistent defamiliarization of the reference to the revealed archetypal model. Yet a singular model, on the other hand. But even this steel discipline is ‘atoned’ through the obvious success of the poetess in her effort to entirely and also in all countless details realize this idea of her new work; she animates it with a mathematical accuracy of the compositional harmony, in an adequate – in terms of content – and fresh, sublime and, moreover, poetic tissue of the language here and there. And what the Serbian poetry gains through *Galgal* by Zlata Kocić is an entirely novel religious experience of love, conceived dually: from the Judeo-Christian theological and Orthodox-anthropological perspectives. Or, after all, a little Chagallean poetic experience of man and the world seen by a loving heart?

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## ABOUT THE STORY AND STORYTELLING

Jovica Aćin: *Pilot tramvaja* [Streetcar Pilot], Laguna, Belgrade, 2019

The analogy of this title and Ivo Andrić's Nobel Banquet speech is by no means a matter of chance, for this novel by Jovica Aćin in many aspects establishes a relation to the writer who has for the history of the Serbian literature earned the sole Nobel Prize so far. Namely, *The Streetcar Pilot* thematizes one of the essential issues of literature – the struggle of the story and writing (down) against oblivion. Does a story live unless told? Does an event which has taken place truly exist unless registered? Has a life (or a number of lives) proved its worth if – once it ends – there is no trace of it? Finally, is not every life-history worthy of storytelling? Or, does it become worthy of it only after being told, or having deserved to be written down?

The novel begins – after the Author's note of dissociation from the similarity of the characters with 'historical figures' – with a chapter which,

unlike the rest of twenty-two, is given a title: “The Lost and Recovered Notebook”; therein, in the manner of postmodernist poetics, a certain illusion is created of the truthfulness regarding the documentary character of the text we are facing. (A similar technique has been resorted to by the Author in a brief episode on the book *Halucinacija/Hallucination*, in which he plays with the readers’ reception using the principle of text-within-text). That is, the chapter explains that the Narrator has in a magical way and after some twenty years found his long-lost notebook by chance, with a reseller on the flea-market; the delight of his ‘reunion’ with his manuscript made him prepare the contents of the notebook for publication. “Whereafter I thought that not everything in this world is so lost that it would become irrecoverable.” Therefore, the novel is told in the first person, but – as becomes clear soon – the main narrator is an old man of Serb origin, now a resident of Marseille where the Editor and Author of the manuscript comes across him by chance (chance – again!) and gets to know him. In this emigrant the Author discovers a man eager to tell a story hidden in him for a long time and agrees to listen to it; he is curious to the extent that he chooses to hear the story even when given the ultimatum by the girl with whom he has arrived to visit Marseille – either the girl or the story.

It is just a story, and, as such, and regardless of its roots in true life, it cannot preponderate over a live creature on the life’s scale. At the same time, it was clear that, if I failed to hear what he wanted to tell, Klisura would have no one to confess to, and it would be lost forever. The lost stories imply deprivation of the world.

Like with Ivo Andrić, who knows that, as there have always been builders and destroyers, there are also guardians of the built structures, Aćin shows in his novel that there are the common and the great men; that there are those who produce hypogenous changes in societies or even civilizations, but also those who make hypogenous shifts (or, perhaps, rearrangements) of the world of the common people they have touched during their lives. There are not only those who exist on the pages of encyclopedias and textbooks, but also those who exist in the hearts they have touched, in the souls bearing their prints, in the sparkles which flash in the eyes of the people remembering them while talking about them – the builders of micro-cosmos and, on the opposite side, the destroyers of the macro-realms. Likewise, however, Aćin actualizes the guardians – the guardians of the story, the mediators and chroniclers of common people’s life-histories; heedful listeners with a subtle inner ear who in such a story recognize its preciousness and still possess that primordial, sacred feeling of being honored by their participation in something eternal that leaves an enduring legacy. Those who are well-aware or who feel that it is the right of every story to become part of eternity, while they act as faithful devotees who support it therein. Those are the true guardians of the Story, treasurers and chroniclers, re-animators of life after it expires.

In the novel, the character of Miljan Klisura embodies that basic need of man to live and endure until the moment when he tells the story which fulfils him. That story is not necessarily his personal story; it can be one about others, too, but Aćin – like Andrić – implies that, talking about others, one talks about himself to the same extent. That each story is refracted through the thoughts, feelings, affinities and inhibitions, misfortunes and fortunes, age, sex, culture and nation, and the language of the storyteller. Speaking of language, mention should be made of a kind of palimpsest technique, characteristic of the postmodernist discourse, which may be the reason why in this novel Aćin opts for the solution to make Miljan, a Serb by origin, tell his story to the narrator's 'I' in the French language, while this guardian of the Story, being what he is, writes down in his notebook a simultaneous translation of the words of his conversational partner into his mother tongue, being extremely careful about semantic nuancing and providing accounts of his own interventions, which is seen in some autopoeitic passages in this work.

However, the similarity to Andrić, who was so far apart from Aćin in terms of poetics, creeps up partially in both the structure of the novel and the narrative techniques which here occur in a cyclical form resembling the one used in *The Damned Yard* (*Prokleta avlja*), based on the story-within-story-within-the-story (and – it deserves a notice – never re-occurred in the Serbian literature, as far as the Author of this article knows at least). For, Miljan Klisura does not tell about himself (only), and neither does the editor of the manuscript. The novel opens with the moment of their acquaintance, but also tells about the Narrator's childhood, a heart-rending story about a girl from the neighborhood who had drowned, a story about his schoolboy darling with whom he has just arrived in Marseille. Seemingly by the way, Miljan Klisura tells him about his arrival in Marseille after the retreat across Albania with his father and a certain Marko, the young man who saved his life and took care of him after father's death. Yet what he actually wanted to tell his partner in the conversation was the story about his friend Benjamin (Venijamin) whom he nicknamed Benny. Thus, the narrating 'I' wrote down then, and is editing 'now', the story about Klisura telling about Benny who further tells about a lot of things and about whom he learned from others during his search for the man: story-within-story-within-another story one gets out of just like from *The Damned Yard*, in an eternal circle of storytelling by a superior voice which had triggered it off, thus suggesting the never-ending and inescapable cyclic path of the Story. In the 'supplement', the book most often referred to in the novel is *Tristram Shandy* by the lucid Laurence Sterne who had anticipated the postmodern deconstruction of the linearity of text and the modern literary genre, the novel, which may also indicate that, in a way, Aćin wants to make his narrative embody the synchronism of the story's flow, that is, of its telling and reading/interpreting times. Yet unlike in Sterne, Aćin's streams of the story are not just common digressions and playing with the reader, but well

thought out and strong structural attachments to the mainstream action, which is to be discovered by the Reader at the end of the novel.

“Stories can intertwine with some other stories, creating a web that keeps gaining in density and volume, one which shall ultimately catch the whole world,” – has been written by Jovica Aćin, who also authored a study titled *Paukova politika* and subtitled *Za kritiku književne metafizike* (*Spider Politics: For the Criticism of Literary Metaphysics*). Additionally, it should be noted that this is only the second novel by the author otherwise known to the readership by his short stories, i.e., collections of these, and that this dense spider web is essentially a masterly woven multitude of ‘small stories’ (in the wake of Kiš’s *Encyclopedia of the Dead* or Pekić’s *New Jerusalem*). And those small stories take place at all significant toponyms of the two major world wars – while they were going on.

However, there is not the slightest trace of national pathos or mythologized lamentation in this novel; contrariwise, the said proliferation of the locations Europewide attaches to it a certain cosmopolitan aspect. To put it even better, there is something which surpasses any kind of borders, and the something is the story, the conversation used by people in order to establish bonds, build friendships and make promises. Although numerous works in the history of the Serbian literature tell – from a temporal distance – about the adversities of the Serbs, as does Miloš Crnjanski’s *Migrations* (*Seobe*) or Rastko Petrović’s *Sixth Day* (*Dan šesti*), this novel by Jovica Aćin manifests no such aspirations but weaves its stories in a subtle and unobtrusive manner, yet one of obvious presence, taking care that the horrors of the last century do not overshadow what is good and valuable in human lives. The same refers to the national topic which we are as a community apt to mythologize, while Aćin – in this case – discreetly reduces its intensity, dynamizing his characters by their travel across the borders of countries or through their mutual conversations in non-mother tongues. In that way, the pompousness of the drums and trumpets of the past becomes less noisy, leaving space for the genuine tragedy yet also the allure of common people’s individual life-histories. That is the abyss each of us bends over, which is different to each of us and which recurs as a leitmotif in the novel. The abyss of death, the abyss of hopelessness, the abyss of war and history, the abyss of the blue sepulcher, the collapse of modern civilization under the Nazi purges, the cleft which opens in the moral principles of the humans involved in the state of war, the chasm gaping over the ostracized and the declared as ‘unfit’ by the totalitarian/Fascist regime... The black hole of an empty soul or the fathomless pit of history that devours people and events as if they had never existed. Perhaps also the abyss of a lost manuscript or the abyss of an untold story, of unfinished storytelling, as well as the abyss stared at ineluctably by Scheherazade while persevering in telling her stories.

It is in relation to this that one should interpret the specific oxymoron in the title of this novel. A pilot covering great distances within a short while vs. a streetcar limited to the rails and forced to move along a determined route sticking to a precise schedule, always halting at the same stops; a pilot availing of the plane's wings and an unimaginable freedom of movement vs. a streetcar which must be connected to the power source from above all the time. Namely, Miljan Klisura (*klisura*<sup>1</sup> is also a kind of abyss, a ravine – as a geographical term) happened, before he became a streetcar driver, to be – incidentally and for a short time – a racecar driver, and these drivers were referred to as ‘pilots’ at the time; thus, when he got his next regular job, he called himself a “streetcar pilot”. A person living in a terrible period of history can surpass the time by cherishing what is most humane and freest in himself, and that is – love: not only love in a romantic partnership, but also friendly love, wanderers’ love, emigrants’ love, love of the humiliated and the insulted, love for storytelling, for bonding.

However, to make a final remark, it should be underlined that this association through storytelling is also a postmodernist transfer from Life to Literature, although the Author says in his introductory note that there exists a “possibility that the characters of the novels become confused with real persons”. Namely, it is known that in 2017 Jovica Aćin translated Walter Benjamin’s book *Andeo istorije* [*The Angel of History*], published by *Službeni glasnik*, in which he included some essays by this author which had never been translated into Serbian before. In some parts of his biography, Klisura’s Benny is associated with Walter Benjamin as a historical figure and his work; in the said publication, one can read that he was “one of the most striking intellectual figures of the twentieth century” who in his contemplative endeavors and essays dealt with the issue of history. So that may be the very “sound of a single drop” heard by Aćin within “the echo of those millions of drops”, which is at the same time the sentence with which he has concluded this novel. However, I shall remind: like every other story, this one, too, is refracted through the soul of its teller, of the person who lives to tell stories, the person who subtly listens in order to record one and who thus spares it from oblivion, perhaps someplace near the sea, as it is in the novel, for “there is no place closer to the Lord other than the ocean, the sea”. Is that not mindful of an angel?

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<sup>1</sup> As a countable noun, *klisura* in Serbian means ‘ravine’ or ‘gorge’. – *Translator’s note.*

## IVO ANDRIĆ, FROM A GERMAN(ISTIC) PERSPECTIVE

Slobodan Grubačić, *Zvona Ive Andrića (The Bells of Ivo Andrić)*,  
Službeni glasnik, Beograd, 2020;

Michael Martens, *U požaru svetova. Ivo Andrić – jedan evropski život: biografija [Within Global Conflagration. Ivo Andric: A European Life]*,  
translated from German by Valeria Fröhlich, Laguna, Beograd, 2020.

Within a mere several weeks' time, in the first few months of the year 2020, two books appeared dealing with the life and work of Ivo Andrić: a comparative study by Slobodan Grubačić, *Zvona Ive Andrića (The Bells of Ivo Andrić)*, and a biographical monograph by Michael Martens *U požaru svetova. Ivo Andrić – jedan evropski život: biografija (Within Global Conflagration subtitled Ivo Andric: A European Life);<sup>1</sup> original title: *Im Brand der Welten: Ivo Andric. Ein Europäisches Leben**. In addition to the obvious coincidence of their subject, the two books are also related mutually by a certain compatibility of the authors' viewpoints, since the author of the former is a prominent Serbian Germanist Slobodan Grubačić, while the latter has been written by Michael Martens, a German journalist of longlived interest in the Serbian culture and, generally, the subjects pertaining to this region. In short, it was almost at the same moment that two works appeared which observe the oeuvre of the Serbian Nobel Laureate within the frame of reference found in a Western European perspective, the German(istic) one in this case.

The synchronicity in the publication of the results from the two inherently harmonious and mutually complementary research projects leaves an impression that the line has been drawn at the bottom of years-consuming historiographical, literary, cinematographical and various other interests in Andrić's deeply ambivalent attitude to a country and its culture, one which he articulated in his *Sveske (Notebooks)* with a somewhat uncharacteristically emphatic intonation: "The Germans and Germany! That is the greatest trouble of my life, a breakdown which in one's destiny may mean either the turning-point or death". On the other hand, the synchronicity may imply the direction of future studies which shall tend to take course toward comparatist interpretations of Andrić's works and that national literature on whose throne Goethe is seated as the most frequently mentioned author in the said writer's notebooks

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<sup>1</sup> The English title has been taken over from the website of Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Faculty of Arts (Southeastern European Studies). On the Internet, one shall also find the amateurish version of the title's translation, *In the Fire of the Worlds. – Translator's note*.

(more frequently than Njegoš<sup>2</sup> and Vuk<sup>3!</sup>), the literature which has in the 20<sup>th</sup> century been elevated to the topmost heights by Thomas Mann, one of Andrić's sacrosanct examples in the art of writing.

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Moving in the wake of the motif-complex of the bells, as the title itself suggests, **Grubačić** has developed an interpretation of a train of thought found in the prose works of Ivo Andrić which relates his creative sensibility to three great authors in the German language – Thomas Mann, R. M. Rilke and Franz Kafka. In Grubačić's opinion, the bell as the second-in-importance symbol in Andrić's oeuvre, as was underlined by Predrag Palavestra<sup>4</sup> almost three decades ago, in his study *Knjiga o Andriću* (*A Book about Andrić*, 1992), “falls within the rank of those important, although much more striking symbols as are the bridges, beauty and the sun(light)” (p. 58). One of the points of departure for Grubačić in his research was a folder from the writer's bequest, preserved in “Ivo Andrić Personal Fund” within the Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, under No. 444, and titled “Zvona” (“Bells”); the contents were collected by the author himself – hand-written copies, newspaper clippings, magazines, brochures and letters “dealing with their histories” (p. 17). Taking, reasonably, this document of literary history as an advantageous and even obligation-imposing guideline, Grubačić analyzes the most outstanding segments of the writer's prose output which explicitly deal with the bell and its complex historical, religious/metaphysical, aesthetical and other symbolisms. He perceives in these “animistic style, human traits attached to metal” (p. 35), deducing that this “central mythologem with Andrić” has its

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<sup>2</sup> **Petar II Petrović Njegoš** (1813–51), usually referred to simply as Njegoš, was Prince-Bishop of Montenegro (r. from 1830) whose literary greatness is mostly based on three epic poems: *Luča mikrokozma* (*The Ray of the Microcosm*), *Gorski vijenac* (*The Mountain Wreath*) and *Lažni car Šćepan Mali* (*The False Tsar Stephen the Little*). In *Spomenica posvećena 150-godišnjici rođenja Petra II Petrovića Njegoša* (*Memory Book on the 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Petar II Petrović Njegoš*) one shall find Andrić's contribution “Nad Njegoševom prepiskom” (“Pondering over Njegoš's Correspondence”).

– *Translator's note*.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Vuk’ is a commonly shortened reference to **Vuk Stefanović Karadžić** (1787–1864), major reformer of the Serbian language and the father of the study of Serbian folklore, primarily the oral literary heritage. His translation of the *New Testament* into Serbian was one of the key events in the history of his mother tongue. Vuk Karadžić was member of the academies in Berlin, Vienna, Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Göttingen, Cracow and Paris. 1987 was ‘The UNESCO Year of Vuk Karadžić’. At a solemn gathering of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Jan. 24, 1946), Ivo Andrić delivered an inaugural address *O Vučku kao piscu* (*About Vuk as a Writer*). The Museum of Vuk and Dositej published the book *Ivo Andrić o Vučku Karadžiću* (*Ivo Andrić about Vuk Karadžić*, 1962). – *Translator's note*.

<sup>4</sup> **Predrag Palavestra** (1913–2014) was a prominent literary critic, editor of literary reviews, Member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. He authored more than 15 books and edited many more. – *Translator's note*.

specific weight which even “outweighs the one of the rainbow image with Goethe” (p. 40). That is the path of Grubačić’s hermeneutic arc: it starts with the document, goes on via an immanent analysis of the artistic text, to end in a parallel with some of the German examples/counterparts, that is, the German counterparts to Andrić’s poetic *Weltanschauung*. The Author deepens his insight with the conclusion that the *pealing* of bells in Andrić’s fiction is actually an emanation of the writer’s articulation – in an artistic manner – of his metaphysical presentiments: “There obviously also exists a non-existent bell, imaginary yet not less authentic – a bell Ivo Andrić believes in. A bell which turns into a sign of poetic mystique” (p. 52).

The second half of the study falls within interpretative parallels to particular writers/works of the German literature. Distancing himself partly from the constant of bell symbolics in Andrić’s oeuvre he stuck to in the first two chapters of the study (and it will only here and there recur in the other two), Grubačić presents an interesting view of the two authors who can undergo juxtaposition, especially when speaking of their masterpieces such as *The Magic Mountain* and *The Damned Yard (Prokleta avlja)*. Despite the awareness of the readership of Andrić’s literary relatedness to Mann which he expressly manifested on several occasions, a comparison of the said two novels may at first sight appear strange, considering all the differences between them, beginning with chronotopes, characters, atmosphere, ideological implications and all the way to the physical criteria – the volumes of the two texts. However, Grubačić observes the kinship of *The Magic Mountain* and *The Damned Yard* in their genetic, that is, structurally, substantial character, embodied in the two men’s reliance on the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (yet another direct and deep connection to Goethe). Although the tradition is more crucial for Mann’s novel, its presence is powerful with Andrić, too, which has been detected with precision and presented in a well-argued way:

More broadly seen, the life-history of the young man from Smyrna is actually an ‘education novel’ in miniature. It does not only tell about the times in which no sensible person would live willfully. About the times some people could solely survive by an escape into speculation, music or – writing. If they had been given a chance. And even if they had, as it was the fortunate case with Kamil, the son of a patrician, some simultaneously glassy and heavy atmosphere would overcast the landscape of his spiritual realm. A dark omen would threaten his peace and tranquility. No one enjoys such an unalloyed happiness without being forced to fight against its impermanence (p. 91).

Apart from being a characteristic sample of Grubačić’s writing manner in a favorable blend of literary-historiographical and scholarly-essayistic discourse, this excerpt provides revelatory evidence of Andrić’s artistic sovereignty which in the central episode of his short novel condenses the constitutive

factor in the development of one of the major descendants of the epic form in the West European culture – the *Bildungsroman*. Grubačić's deepened insight – apart from the autonomous value of his nuanced analytical penetration into the work of a writer – incites further comparative research along the relation Ivo Andrić–Thomas Mann, since the immeasurable literature about Andrić's oeuvre has for a long time been lacking in a fundamental study of the relation between *The Damned Yard* and the work which only seems to be more incomparable with it than *The Magic Mountain* – the novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, and their intertextual connectedness was suggested almost thirty years ago by Ivo Tartalja<sup>5</sup> in his book *Put pored znakova (Road by the Signs)*, 1991).

The closing section [of Grubačić's book] juxtaposes the oeuvres of Andrić, Rilke and Kafka, revealing their poetic kinship in terms of artistic representation of reality as a circus venue. Within the somewhat rambling interpretative horizon which freely moves across the formally diverse texts of the three authors, establishing perhaps overly loose coincidences at some points, the *circus mundi* recurs as a constant beyond any doubt, whether it be an issue of the presented reality or the inner world of the protagonists in the texts analyzed, or their fragments. Life as make-believe, as illusion, and a magician's trick in the suggested metaphorical sense, appears with Andrić's protagonists in a *flicker*, which is “like with Kafka and Rilke, an emotional experience of dramatic impact” (p. 147). Discovering – in a series of maxims, excerpts, poetic images – thus ‘colored’ artistic thoughtfulness, the author has – to put it in the spirit of his thesis, with some hermeneutic acrobatics – placed Andrić among the authors who are not as close to him as Thomas Mann doubtlessly is. Anyhow, the vista from the closing point back toward the opening of the book involves a consistent and devoted effort to observe and analyze in greater depth Andrić's inexhaustible oeuvre, especially in its correlation with the German literary tradition. It is in that sense that an objection could be raised regarding the title of the book, which in the beginning suggests a thematically narrowed perspective and a more steadfast analytical concentration onto the title motif throughout the chapters of the study. Though, a well-meaning reader shall conclude that (s)he has been given nothing *different* from what (s)he has been promised, but somewhat *more* than (s)he has expected.

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According to his own words in the “Introduction to the Serbian Edition”, Martens intended his book for the readership in “the countries within the

<sup>5</sup> Ivo Tartalja (1930–2020) was a prominent Serbian theoretician and historian of literature, university professor. The title of the above-mentioned book is actually an inverted form of the title of Andrić's *Signs by the Roadside* (*Znakovi pored puta*); the subtitle of Tartalja's work reads *Tragom Andrićevog stvaralaštva (In the Wake of Andrić's Art)*. – Translator's note.

German-speaking regions (later also the regions of other languages, possibly)", and it was conceived as "an attempt of getting familiar with a man and an age" (p. 9). These introductory notes underline two crucial characteristics of Martens' biographical work: it is a life-history of Andrić from an 'external' perspective, unlike the naturally prevailing similar research in our domestic (literary) historiography, while the researcher's eye journeys over the writer's shoulder into the depth of his age. Therefore, it is by no means a matter of chance that Martens – in the introductory section of the Serbian edition – emphasizes the special importance of two Andrić's biographers for his own study: Žaneta Djukić Perišić, the author of the (so far) most voluminous biography of Andrić, *Pisac i priča (A Writer and His Story, 2012)*, and Dušan Glišović, a Germanist who most thoroughly studied Andrić's "Berlin years" in his book *Ivo Andrić, Kraljevina Jugoslavija i Treći Rajh (Ivo Andrić, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Third Reich, 2012)*. Namely, in his book *Within Global Conflagration* Martens tended to put together the comprehensive depiction of the writer's life and his particular interest in his place within the eventful history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, giving special attention to the peak of Andrić's diplomatic career, the post of Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Berlin.

In an interesting interview given to the Serbian media, Martens emphasized his reasons for such an approach: he made up his mind to invest such an effort displeased by the fact that in Austria and Germany – even among the students of Slavic studies – Andrić is insufficiently read and known as a writer who was crucially marked by the historical heritage of his native country and, moreover, personally deeply involved in the historical events, more than many other important authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Martens specially refers to Nobel laureates). However, the results of that research are welcome not only among the (West) European public, but also the Regional<sup>6</sup> public involved – over the recent years – in ever-harsher controversies with regard to the 'portrait' and work of Ivo Andrić. There are several inevitable, and not quite minor, shortcomings of the work, but Martens has written a book rich in substance and, in a sense, unbiased (and Andrić has often been written about with various kinds of heated emotions); on the one hand, it synthesizes the knowledge about the writer accumulated to this day, while on the other fills in some blurred points in his biography, that is, casts light on these from a fresh perspective.

Although written in a popular-scientific manner, without tools indicating the use of documents and sources, Martens' study about the biography of Ivo Andrić is based on his enviable familiarity with the past research on this author

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<sup>6</sup> The adjective 'Regional' is derived from the recently introduced euphemism 'the Region', invented to refer 'unifyingly' to the territories of the former republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which have meanwhile, mostly in 1990's, gained the status of independent countries. – *Translator's note*.

and, in addition, the newly-discovered documentation from a number of archives and other sources. Martens has mostly fulfilled the self-imposed task: his book can be an introduction to Andrić's life-history and, at the same time, provide a guideline to a more meticulous or more specific familiarization with the man's life and work. As a seasoned journalist and himself a fiction writer (his novel *Heldensuche. Die Geschichte des Soldaten, der nicht töten wollte*<sup>7</sup> was published in Serbian in 2013 as *Upotrazi za junakom: Priča o vojniku koji nije htio da ubije*), Martens has told the biography of Ivo Andrić as a man capable of introducing vivacity into now-obscure and now-ambiguous historical/biographical information. Although dragged-out in terms of style, Martens' book about Andrić's life has not been a piece of ambitious non-fiction turning into pseudo-literature, which is an ever-present danger threatening a biographer, but has remained a biography in the strictest sense of the word.

One of the qualities of Martens' book worth pointing out is the Author's good knowledge of Ivo Andrić's literary output. Some of the significant details of the writer's biography have been detected by Martens in Andrić's short stories, novels and notes in the form of masked autobiographical facts. Thus, at the very beginning of the short story "Bife Titanik" ("The *Titanic* Buffet"), he saw the flashback about the earlier life of Stjepan Ković as a literarily transformed family history of the writer himself (p. 24). Equally intriguing and also probable is his hypothesis about Andrić's residential address in [Belgrade's] Prizrenska Street during the war and an opportunity to watch the railway station and the prisoners awaiting transportation to a Nazi camp being related to the words of the writer's hero Ali Hoca that express a sinister presentiment about the construction of the railroad tracks at Višegrad (p. 172). Journeying through the writer's life, the author of the book *Within Global Conflagration* guides the reader through Andrić's literary oeuvre, penetrating deeper into some concrete texts when such a necessity and/or a suitable opportunity occurs.

Another quality of importance found in this biography is the Author's objectivity as a researcher and a writer: his picture of Andrić is neither black nor white, as has often been the case in a rather large number of writings of various kinds and provenances that deal with the Serbian Nobelist. Andrić emerges before the reader's eye with all of his artistic and human virtues, yet also with some traits of character which could hardly be termed exemplary. On the one hand, Martens depicts Andrić as a young revolutionary and impassioned patriot during the Great War, and a consistent demonstrator of civil courage in the years of Nazi occupation, but also an "opportunist" (p. 277) facing the Communist regime; within the Communist system, the writer would – in addition to a kind of Ketman – manifest selective solidarity with the foreign intellectuals suffering under totalitarian authorities, which was not

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<sup>7</sup> *Tracing the Hero: The Story of a Soldier Who Didn't Want to Kill.*

the case with those who were exposed to various forms of oppression in the Socialist Yugoslavia (p. 261). That is how a rather solid relief image of a multiply interesting person has been created – the person who was, in terms of a moral axis, slurred as much as praised to the skies with the same conviction on the part of the authors of their own infallibility, proportionate to their distance from the actual truth about Andrić's life and work.

In that sense, there is an unavoidable issue on the repertory of Andrićology over the long years: the extensively construed and abused issue of the writer's attitude to Bosnia's Muslims and Islam. Tending to look upon Andrić's life and literature without bias, Martens – as an 'external' observer tied to Andrić by the affinities of a reader above all – has articulated an analytically unambiguous judgement, well-founded on the writer's oeuvre:

Did he, in his books, create "an atmosphere of Turkish guilt" and defame Islam as the source of all evil? Those searching for such examples will certainly find in Andrić's works a lot of depictions of horrible violence practiced by the Muslims against the Christians. But there are also examples of horrors committed by the Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs. Simply, Andrić does not have a positive idea about the way in which the people belonging to the authorities treat those lacking in power: "The people are here just to torture and kill one another, that is how it has always been and will forever be" – is a sentence ascribed to Goethe by [Egon] Friedell in *A Cultural History of the Modern Age* and written down by Andrić. Since many of his stories take place in the times when "the Turks" ruled the Balkans, his negative picture of the people particularly refers to depicting of the Muslims – for they had the greatest power and, hence, the greatest opportunity to do evil (p. 169).

The anti-Andrić campaign, most successfully exposed by Zoran Milutinović in *Bitka za prošlost* (*A Battle for the Past*, 2018) – surprisingly, missing from Martens' bibliography – has in Martens' book been given strong and convincing countervailing evidence which poses an obstacle to further ideologically impassioned as much as – in terms of literary theory – unfounded claims about an oeuvre rooted in the highest humanistic values.

Being particularly interested in the Berlin years of Ivo Andrić, Martens shows that period of the writer's life with uncommon care and exhaustiveness, presenting some new facts about his days as a diplomat in the capital of the Third Reich. Here we see Ivo Andrić in the well-known episodes of his biography: handing in the letter of credence to Adolf Hitler, whereafter he lived a double life of a diplomat under surveillance, one forced to praise the current authorities reassuring them with regard to the Yugoslav-German friendship while leaving traces in his notebook of his personal disgust and anxiety caused by what he witnessed and had premonition of. There are, moreover, testimonies to Andrić's private relations, prevailingly with artists and intellectuals, mostly the admirers of his literary talent, such as the Chancellor's favorite sculptor Arno Breker,

as well as Carl Schmitt and, through this man, Ernst Jünger, the author who in 1960's tried to renew his contact with Andrić – an attempt to which Andrić did not respond, in his careful silence about his past in Berlin. Likewise, it is with particular reason that Martens accentuates Andrić's last days in Berlin when he, as “an ambassador of reduced authority”, was exposed to a kind of personal and professional shame, since the Yugoslav Regency negotiated the signing of the Tripartite Pact behind his back, using Andrić as a sort of “mis-leading landmark” – as his position was accurately seen by the historian Andrej Mitrović (“Andrić kao diplomata”, *Sveske Zadužbine Ivo Andrića*,<sup>8</sup> Year 9-10, Vol. 7, 1991, pp. 216–221).

Although a reliable chronicler of Ivo Andrić's life, yet not disinclined to conveying some undependable biographical anecdotes which have to this day remained but rumors on the writer's privacy, Martens has – in his effort to provide a historical context to Andrić and his work – succumbed to a kind of simplification of history; for that reason, he has met with rather harsh criticism. The picture of the Second World War on the South Slavic territories has been generalized and simplified to a considerable extent (pp. 174–178): it has followed the stereotyped model of “asymmetrical symmetry”, as this discourse-related phenomenon has been termed by Milo Lompar in his book *Duh samoporicanja (The Spirit of Self-Denial)*, 2011), and provides (a foreign reader with) an insufficiently solid idea about the “internal” conflicts of the period 1941–1945; it was the drastic extent and turns of these that influenced some of Andrić's intimate and political preferences, and Lompar's book (not enlisted by Martens as a source) offers a systematic survey thereof. Judging by his proven dedication to his subject, the Author's intentions have stayed beyond conscious simplifications, but a higher level of historiographical delicacy is certainly necessary when similar issues are in question, regardless of their *secondary* character in relation to the focus of the researcher's attention; the more so because this secondary character is at the very beginning relativized by the above-cited announcement about the book being “an attempt of getting familiar with a man and an *age*”.

The blurb on the book cover aimed to convince the reader that this is “the first all-encompassing biography of our Nobelist” is certainly a marketing-style exaggeration, if one bears in mind the existence of the titles (in addition to the above mentioned *A Writer and Story*) such as *Ivo Andrić: život (Ivo Andrić: Life)*, 1988) and *Balkanski Homer (The Balkan Homer)*, 1991) by Radovan Popović. Exemplary biographies of Ivo Andrić include the research in some particular *phases* of his life and work, such as the books *Rani Andrić*

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<sup>8</sup> *Sveske Zadužbine Ivo Andrića (Tomes of Ivo Andrić Foundation)* is a review published since 1982 by the Ivo Andrić Foundation which offers Andrić's unpublished/ unknown manuscripts, correspondence etc., as well as scholarly and critical studies/ essays about his life and work, his spiritual realm, the time and the world in which he lived. The contributors to *Sveske* are prominent Serbian and foreign experts and scholars.  
– *Translator's note*.

(*The Early Andrić*, 1980) by Miroslav Karaulac, or *Angažovani Andrić* (*The Committed Andrić*, 2012) by Ratko Peković and Slobodan Kljakić – as reliable guidelines for further studies and possible syntheses in this complex subject susceptible to diverse interpretations. In spite of that, the book *Within Global Conflagration*, abundant in new cognitions on Ivo Andrić's professional life of a diplomat and an author alike (the contribution to our better insight into the history of Andrić's Nobel Prize is of special importance), is a valuable contribution to diversified area of (literary-)historiographical research programs and an incentive to a more scrupulous approach to the person in whom some of the most significant aspirations of the Serbian 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and history were reflected.

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## A “SHORT HISTORY” OF LONG DURATION OR TOWARDS BETTER VISIBILITY OF SERBIAN LITERATURE IN FRANCE

*Précis de littérature serbe*, sous la direction de Milivoj Srebro, PUB, Pessac 2019

The book in front of us is a French translation of the *Short History of Serbian Literature*, which Milivoj Srebro, a professor at the Department of the Slavic Studies at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne, prepared and supplemented for the needs of the French-speaking reading public. Let us remind you, that is a collective work published under that title in 2010 within the project the *Anthology of the Serbian Literature*,<sup>1</sup> which is composed of chapters on the literature and language taken from the collection of works the *History of Serbian Culture*.<sup>2</sup> To that *Short History*, whose integral text was translated by Alain Capone, the author of the French edition added two new chapters written directly in French, in which he presented literary works from the last four decades since the Serbian edition ends in the 1980s. The publication of this handbook, which is primarily intended for the academic audience – students,

<sup>1</sup> See: *Short History of Serbian Literature*, 2010, in: *Anthology of Serbian Literature*, digital library, choice of work: Teacher Training College of the University in Belgrade. (<http://www.antologijasrpskeknjizevnosti.rs>)

<sup>2</sup> *History of Serbian Culture*, editorial board Pavle Ivić ... [et al.], Decije novine, Gornji Milanovac and the Association of the Publishers and Booksellers of Yugoslavia, Belgrade 1994.

lecturers of the Serbian language and literature, Slavists and comparatists – but also for all those who want to become better acquainted with Serbian literature and culture, deserves attention due to the fact that in view of the books of similar purpose in France, there is only a brief history of the *Croatian and Serbian literature*, published in 1981 under the leadership of Janin Matijon Lasić. However, it lacks insight into the relevant facts that refer to the period of the almost past seven decades, since it is a translation of Antun Barac's work the *Yugoslav Literature* from distant 1954.

In his opening words, the author points out that one of the key motifs that led him to this publishing endeavour was the desire to contribute to a stronger affirmation of the Serbian literature in France, bearing in mind that its reception, despite two centuries of presence and occasional breakthroughs, has remained rather modest. Srebro sees one of the causes of such a state in its insufficient recognizability since many important works that form an integral part of its corpus have remained inextricably connected to the notion of the Yugoslav literature. For this reason, there was a necessity to see its uniqueness, to identify it as a different one. And as it is necessary to distinguish the miscellaneous identification of one literature from a linguistic perspective as well, the author draws special attention to the introductory chapter the “Serbian Literary Language and Its History”, whose author is Pavle Ivić. Bearing in mind that the French reader is generally insufficiently acquainted with the historical-linguistic context, the information related to the description and evolution of the Serbian language, as well as the characteristics of the dialects that are part of it, are so much more precious, enabling the reader to see not only the existing but also non-existing differences between the Serbian and some newly formed languages after the break-up of Yugoslavia. In the introductory word, the author mentions another important issue – the national affiliation of Dubrovnik literature. Explaining why it is not included in this history, he points out that he decided to respect the original edition and that in the outlining of the main developmental stages of the Serbian national literature, and give primacy to those courses that most largely express its peculiarity, and here we are talking about, as Jovan Deretić also pointed out, about the “border phenomenon” and the “second-degree tradition”. As the *Short History of Serbian Literature* is well-known to our readers, we will not look at the first five chapters which present the most important facts related to the origin and the development of the Serbian literature, and describe its evolutionary and structural specifics (Pavle Ivić, “Serbian Literary Language and its History”); Radmila Marinković, “Medieval Literature”; Nada Milošević Đorđević, “[Oral] Folk Literature”; Jovan Deretić, “Literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries”; Novica Petković, “Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century [until 1990 ]”). We will dwell on the parts with which Milivoj Srebro supplemented this work in the French edition, and those are the sixth and the seventh

chapters (“Literature at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” and the “Literature from the year 2000”), as well as the afterword (“View on Serbian Literature and its History”). Let us add that the handbook is completed with the index of the authors’ names and a selective but extensive bibliography, which includes works of the Serbian literature translated into French, studies and critical articles published in France, the subject of which is Serbian literature.

The two new chapters are divided into compositionally balanced segments and bring together a wide range of the authors (around 150) whose selection is mainly based on the criteria valid in the books of similar purpose, whether they are anthologies or critical studies. The data on the presented authors are concise, and the space assigned to them (between 10 and 20 lines) is mostly considered by the importance they have in the existing value system. Representative works of the selected writers, poets and playwrights are listed, and then their stylistic-formal or thematic specifics are described. By intertwining his observations and judgments with relevant assessments presented in the literary-historical and critical texts and putting in the foreground what has become an objectified value, the author manages to maintain scientific impartiality and avoid the trap of apologetics that we easily fall into when we are driven by the tendency to fight for more place under the sun for our own space in the space of “other people’s” culture.

The sixth chapter is divided into two parts, in whose titles the close connection between the Serbian literature and history is highlighted (“Period of ‘Detitoization’: 1980-1990”, “In the Shadow of the Wars: 1990-2000”). This division was necessary in order to complete the previous chapter in its entirety, specifically the period from 1980 to 1990, which in the original version from 1994 could not be seen in totality due to the lack of time distance. Thus, in the first segment of the first entirety, the focus is on the work of writers who, by re-actualizing a number of taboo topics, contributed to the destruction of an ideological normativism (emphasis was put on the books that were perceived as heretical at the time, and whose authors were G. Đogo, J. Radulović, A. Isaković, D. Kovačević, D. Popović...). Positively assessing the role of the authors whose subversiveness paved the way for greater freedom of expression and enabled the overcoming of entrenched ideological dogmas, Srebro also expresses his critical attitude towards a number of works that gained popularity through overemphasized political engagement, sometimes to the detriment of the aesthetic quality (p. 127). In the second segment, which represents a wide range of different aesthetic and poetic concepts that marked this period in prose, such as B. Pekić, A. Tišma, D. Kiš, S. Selenić, B. Šćepanović, M. Danojlić, etc., and poetry: A. Petrov, B. Petrović, R. Petrov Nogo, A. Vukadinović, N. Tadić, etc. In the third, the focus shifts to the playwrights’ creativity (Lj. Simović, V. Ognjenović, S. Selenić, R. Pavlović, M. Ševarlić ...), whose main trends are seen “in a common perspective, (de) dramatization of national historical destiny”.

In the second part of the same chapter, which refers to the literary work of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the novel and the short story are examined first (D. Mihailović, M. Josić Višnjić, S. Velmar-Janković, V. Stevanović, D. Albahari, G. Petrović, S. Basara, V. Arsenijević, D. Velikić, M. Savić, J. Radulović, F. David...), whose common characteristics the author sees in the literary hybridity and parallelism of opposing aesthetic orientations. Chiselling the image of the literary trends of that period, he dwells on the prominent figures in poetry (M. Tešić, M. Petrović, D. Jovanović Danilov, S. Tontić, K. Mićević, R. Lazić...) and illuminates their specifics. Despite all the differences that he notices in this divergence both on the formal-aesthetic and on the thematic-content level, Srebro finds that the historical conditionality of national literature remains unquestionable: the stamp of the “stirred history” and “troubled times” remains, namely, strongly present not only in prose and poetry but also in the playwrights’ creativity, whose key themes are still inextricably linked to the “dramatic reality” (D. Kovačević, S. Kovačević, N. Romčević ...).

The selection was certainly more complicated when it comes to the past two decades, not only because of the pronounced poetic divergence – which remains a feature of this period as well – but also because of the lack of sufficient time distance which would enable the sifting of a fairly rich production. Hence, in the seventh chapter (“Literature after 2000”), a slightly larger number of protagonists found themselves under the lens. This small but necessary disproportion has conditioned a more synthetic expression and greater conciseness in the data, especially when it comes to the writers of younger generations whose place is not yet fully established in the existing value system. In the first two segments (“Between the Turbulent Past and the Uncertain Future”, “Expanding the Dominance of the Novel”), the prose work of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is considered (M. Pavić, R. Beli Marković, M. Vuksanović, Đ. Pisarev, M. Prodanović, M. Toholj, V. Kecmanović, V. Zurić, S. Ilić, V. Bajac, A. Gatalica, V. Matijević, V. Tasić, S. Valjarević, S. Vladusić, N. Malović, I. Marojević, S. Damjanov, J. Aćin, D. Stojiljković, M. Pantić, S. Tešin, U. Šajtinac, V. Tabašević ...). From a wide range of works of the most various thematic, conceptual and aesthetic orientation author singles out the works that are considered the most representative of the contemporary moment and determine their characteristics – from the narratives that remain in the wake of the collective destiny concerning and promoting the return to the tradition, through humorous inversion of the epic form and dethroning its pathos, to valorizing intimist tendencies and courageous postmodernist actions that mediate new interpretations of history and ethnos.

In the third segment, Srebro perceives contemporary Serbian poetry, which is also characterized by the parallelism of different aesthetic-formal and conceptual orientations, but also the intertwining of several generations (M. Petrović, S. Tontić, R. Isojević, I. Negrišorac, N. Vučić, Z. Đerić, V. Karanović, B. Lazić, G. Božović...). New verism, extreme reduction in the

expression and evoking the banal and everyday, gentle lyricism, striving to immerse oneself in the depths of one's own being and language, searching for the erudite forms and intertwining the poetics of the modern with the classical aesthetic ideal... are just some of the manifestations of this diversity. The author draws attention to the growing importance of "women's writing", visible both in prose (Lj. Arsić, G. Ćirjanić, J. Lengold, M. Novaković, S. Domazet...) and in poetry (I. Milankov, A. Ristović, T. Šuškić, D. Seferović, N. Živančević...), noting that in the theatre – which is otherwise characterized by a meeting of various energies and many talented playwrights (F. Vujošević, D. Vojnov, U. Šajtinac...) – about whom can be said that their triumph is at work (B. Srbljanović, M. Marković, M. Pelević, T. Šljivar...).

Recalling the fact that the Serbian literature has shown great resilience, managing not only to survive in many storms of history but also to conquer the most complex forms and narratives, Srebro concludes this chapter by assessing that "its main trump cards for the future are vitality and spiritual openness" (page 173). And that vitality, in addition to the rich production, is evidenced above all by its top achievements, which correspond to the European spiritual horizons both when they grow out of historical heroics and remain in the furrow of the traditional, and when they turn to the new forms and contents in illuminating their own spiritual continuities. And they show the unsustainability of all divisions of literature into the "big" and "small", the author is explicit, because the only meaningful line of separation can be drawn between those in which the vortices of life energies constantly give birth to the new forms and contents and those in which fruitful forces are fading, withering – which is certainly not the case with the Serbian literature. In the afterword ("View on Serbian Literature and its History"), Srebro returns to the thesis that a specific relationship with the national history is one of the key features of the Serbian literature. Supporting it with his analysis in the previous chapters, he now supplements and nuances it, pointing to the fact that the nature of that relationship has changed significantly in the past two centuries. If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian literature was a prisoner of history and its epic heroics, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it managed to get rid of its restraints, the author emphasizes, as shown in the work of Miloš Crnjanski: with its strong metaphysical dimension it constantly transcends the historical reality, although it remains firmly anchored in it. Nowadays, concludes Srebro, history is inversely related to the role it played in the previous two centuries since its writers "no longer serve it but use it"; it becomes a kind of their ally and precious treasury from which the knowledge of the Serbian being yesterday and today has been drawn (pp. 183 and 185). Another important element to which the author draws the attention of the French reader, considering it necessary for the understanding of the Serbian culture and literature, is the osmosis of the Eastern and Western heritage. Not only because the intersection of the two cultural models determined specific spiritual constituents – where the combination of a tragic sense

of destiny and a fatalistic attitude towards reality with the sober spirit and rationalism that even Cvijić and Skerlić noticed among the Serbs is the most often borne in mind – but also because it prevents the dominance of rigid identities and conditions greater receptivity to the new values. And these are the qualities that are positively valued in the French culture, which tends to identify them with the virtues all the more so because it sees in them a key feature of its own civilization. Let us recall Braudel's words that precisely in the openness of the French crossroads, “which is without a doubt the main sign of our civilization, unequivocally lies both our significance and our glory”,<sup>3</sup> but also Valery's observation that the secret of the supreme fruits of the French culture lies above all in the “crossbreeding and constant grafting of the tree”, which – as the poet inspiringly puts it – “achieves happy connections of very different juices which are directed to achieve one indivisible existence”.<sup>4</sup>

Stylistically rounded and in the additional parts harmonized with the concept of the original, the French edition of the *Short History of Serbian Literature* represents a work worthy of attention, above all as a source of reliable information about the dynamic life of the Serbian literature and the exuberance of its talents. Following up on the previous endeavours of a similar direction realized in French by Milivoj Srebro – editing the *Anthology of Serbian Short Stories* (1950-2000) and the collection of works *Serbian Literature in the European Context*, as well as the launching of the digital magazine *Serbika* (in which 26 thematic issues have been published since 2013 – about medieval literature, the poetry of romanticism, narrators of realism, Njegoš, Andrić, Crnjanski, Dučić, D. Kovačević...) – it will surely contribute to shaping the notion of the identity of the Serbian literature. And that is certainly an important precondition for its better reception and stronger affirmation, although not the only one. For its directing towards the desired valorization, it is necessary, namely, that its most significant works are available to the French readers, in time – since each cultural domain has its own historicity.<sup>5</sup> In that context, we must not overlook the merit of Alain Capone, who, in addition to

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<sup>3</sup> Fernand Braudel, “History of Civilizations: The Past Explains the Present,” trans. by Branko Jelić, in the Anthology of French Essays, chosen by Milan Komnenić, Službeni glasnik, Belgrade 2010, 228

<sup>4</sup> Paul Valery, “Today's France”, trans. by Stanislav Vinaver, in: *Illumination of the World: Book on France, Works of Stanislav Vinaver*, book 6, edited by Gojko Tešić, Službeni glasnik, Belgrade 2012, 450

<sup>5</sup> The small number of critical reviews that accompanied some of the most significant achievements of the Serbian literature in France can be partly explained by the fact that they remained inaccessible for a long time. Thus, the translation of the first Serbian novel, *Pure Blood* by Borisav Stanković, was awaited for several decades (1940). A similar thing happened with the *Migrations* by Miloš Crnjanski; namely, almost half a century passed until the moment when Francophone readers were given the opportunity to get acquainted with this masterpiece of the Serbian literature (1986).

five chapters of this work, translated about forty other books from Serbian into French and thus made an undoubted contribution to better visibility of the Serbian literature and its creative achievements in the Francophone cultural space.

*Marija DŽUNIĆ DRINJAKOVIĆ*

Translated from Serbian by  
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## SERBIAN LITERARY HISTORY AS AN OPEN STORY

Nenad Nikolić, *Identity of Serbian Literature: A Story of a Literary-Historical Idea*, Serbian Literary Guild – Parthenon, Belgrade 2019

The need to reflect on the definition and constitutive elements that make up the identity of Serbian literature, the need to shape the narrative meaning of the notion of Serbian literature in order to resolve the nodal points of its continuation, such as the relationship of folk, old and new literature, and achieve a yearning for its unity, manifested itself in the works of Serbian literary historians – from Georgije Magarašević to Jovan Deretić. Their literary-historical practice testifies not only to the immanent and contextual complexity of Serbian literary creation per se but also to the necessary skill of balancing the interpretation of the aesthetic and the contextual, possessing a synthetic gift and inevitably of reducing the cognitive potentials of an individual literary work, the ability to put a certain work in the entirety of a literary-historical narrative and through it to figure out the common sense of one time. It is precisely the aspiration to perceive the way in which the question of the identity of Serbian literature was created in Serbian literary historiography is based on the recent book by Nenad Nikolić, awarded the “Nikola Milošević” Award for the best book in the field of literary theory and art, aesthetics and philosophy, whose introductory chapter “What is Serbian literature?”, As well as the final one, “The Identity of Serbian literature: an open story”, apostrophizes for his scientific understanding of Serbian literary-historical activity the key idea of the notion of the identity. Understanding it as a dynamic, variable category that lasts changing, thus determining the identity of Serbian literature as a narrative identity presented by creating a plot that unites previously mutually inconsistent judgments about what Serbian literature is and enables the preservation of the identity claims of desacralizing predictions, those that imply the differentiations concludes:

It should not be expected that the answer to the question of what Serbian literature is will appear as some kind of a definition, it can only be a meaningful effect of a literary-historical story about different defining identity substantializations that sought their confirmation through literary-historical stories.

The chapter of the book “Foundation of National Literature” deals with the literary-historical views of three authors – Georgije Magarašević, Jovan Subotić and Jovan Ristić, whose modest studies outline the aspects of Serbian literature in the light of the romantic concept of nation and literature. The first author of this triad understood the history of literature as deciphering the way in which what is constant in the spirit of the nation is manifested, which presented its substantiality in Dositej’s figure, mother tongue, which, by connecting all the layers of the society, provided a symbolic basis for the existence of the nation, confirming that the spirit of the people is expressed in language itself. Although he agreed with Magarašević regarding the position and significance of Dositej’s personality, Subotić however, expressed a different view on folk poetry: unlike Magarašević, who, leaving aside folk literature, turned to language as the source of the spirit of the nation, Subotić testified about the possibility of writing artistic poetry on the basis of folk poetry, and hence a large part of Subotić’s review of Serbian literature deals with folk poetry as a direct expression of the nature of the Serbian people. Ristić’s concept is that the national literature, based on the category of the nation, chiliastic and distinctly historical, came about under the auspices of the nation-state as the institutional framework of the national literature. His literary-historical thought included, as Nikolić notes, both the attitude that the national line of modern Serbian literature is manifested in the successful assimilation of the appropriations from the West and the adoption of the relevant features of folk poetry (as is the case in the works of Radičević, Ilić and Njegoš) and a specific view of language, its dynamism, development and romantic mysticism evident in Subotić’s assessment of Serbian *Dictionary* as a work that simultaneously reflects the real life of the language and the delay towards it, which is why the “hidden course of language” should be sought among the lines of that work.

Stojan Novaković’s literary-historical views, to which the chapter “Stojan Novaković: History of National Literature as Folk Literature” is dedicated, although relying on the romantic heritage of Subotić and Ristić and their understanding of Serbian literature whose foundation is recognized in folklore, however, differ from them because Novaković talks exclusively about the folk (and not the nation), creating the impression of the uninterrupted duration of the nationality as a substance expressed precisely in folk literature. Unlike the mentioned authors, for whom the issue of substantiality and institutionality did not cause any difficulties, since they dealt only with Serbian literature from Dositej, Novaković was faced, by which Nikolić at the same time sen-

sibly and precisely emphasizes the line of divergence, pointing out to more demanding task intertwined with the question of the unity of Serbian literature that will accompany literary historiography until the twentieth century. Including in his *History of Serbian Literature* (first edition in 1867, and revised version in 1871) and old literature of Dubrovnik and the literature of the Serb Catholics and the Croats after 1835, Novaković was forced to explain not only the connections between the old and new Serbian literature but also to find the fibulae in terms of Dubrovnik-Dalmatia, Croatian and the literature of regionally determined Catholics. Nikolić equally points out the differences between the first and second editions of Novaković's History (replacing linguistic exposition with the philosophy of language in the tradition of Herder's ideas, as well as the increase in historiography and the tendency to connect each phenomenon with its time or to establish sources/counterparts); sheds light on the distinct perspective of Dositej's figure, which depended on the needs of the literary-historical story and its plots, and the reasons for such versatile views (when it was necessary to mark the turn from church-school to folk literature in the first section of the book, Dositej figured as a turning point, devoid of more pronounced deficiencies, which, however, came to the foreground at the beginning of the second section, because it was necessary to present the turning point brought by Vuk's standardization of the vernacular as a literary language as opposed to Slavonic-Serbian). Novaković's literary-historical thought is also characterized by a substantialist belief in the sameness of the nationalities, necessary for Serbian literature to be exposed as a whole, then the idea of progress as an enlightenment heritage whose outcome is romantically determined – folk literature in the vernacular, but also a special contradiction between, on the one hand, demands for the purity of folklore as the foundation of folk literature (substantialist understanding) and the belief, on the other hand, that the same foundation can be reached by the natural development of old literature (historical observation of the past).

As for the crucial question of the existence of the unity of Serbian literature and the potential way of its presentation, Nikolić follows the literary-historical thoughts of Jovan Skerlić expressed in the monographs *Youth and its Literature*, *Serbian Literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* and *History of New Serbian Literature*, which is the culmination of his synthetic work. Although he continued the tradition of dividing Serbian literature into the old and new but in a radicalized form now, reducing the old Serbian medieval literature to the literacy of monks, Skerlić institutionalized Serbian literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an important part of the new Serbian literature, viewing it so independently that he presented the thesis of two traditions of Serbian literature: Dositej's, based on rationalist, Western ideas, and Vuk Karadžić's, based on romantic and narrowly nationalist views. He integrated both traditional routes into the idea (tendency to emphasize the ideas originates from his rationalist-positivist orientation) about the course of literature by “reaction and devel-

opment”, into the axiom about the evolution of literature according to the laws of alternation/rhythm in which Nikolić recognizes the problematic place:

...what was inconsistent with the tradition of Dositej's rationalism was understood in a negative way, but in order to preserve the idea of alternating/rhythmic development of literature, it was necessary to single it out as the prevailing tendency of the epoch.

If the history of literature is understood as spiral progress on the principle of the alternation, Skerlić could not consider Dositej's personality as an expression of a more general and long-lasting historical process, but his appearance was understood as an epochal turning point, the beginning of the story of new Serbian literature, radically separated from the old literature, which, in fact, was not literature but literacy. Nikolić insightfully observes that within the framework of Skerlić's literary-historical practice, a contradictory attitude is established both towards Dositej's understandings and towards the old literature. In the first case, by refusing to recognize anything more than literacy in the old literature, by excluding the literature of the Catholic part of Serbian people, i.e. those who considered themselves Serbs but lived in the area covered by the Croatian national idea at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century so that finally such a narrowed scope of Serbian literature, reduced to the literary creation of the Orthodox Serbs, would be called Dositej's literature, which is based on the enlightened, not confessional linguistic nationalism, is the key contradiction of Skerlić's conception of Serbian national literature. According to Nikolić, the reasons should be sought in avoiding that what is defined as part of the Croatian literature in any way becomes related to Serbian literature due to the high degree of Croatian sensitivity in that regard and Croatian chauvinism, which Skerlić himself became aware of at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the occasion of Zmaj's Anniversary celebration in Zagreb. In the second case, the thesis that Serbian medieval literature could not have influenced the literature of the new, secular age disagrees with Skerlić's insights regarding Kiprijan Račanin, whom he describes as the successor of the older Serbian literary tradition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or Zaharije Orfelin as a mediator between the older theological and the new literature of the enlightenment. Nikolić perceives such discrepancies as Skerlić's strategic decisions that precede literary-historical determining, therefore they are not indicators of a violent adjustment of history but of his own literary-historical opinion in the name of the law of alternation, even when it means that a literary historian must abandon certain previous conceptualizations which he presented. Insisting on the concept of Serbian literature as national literature at the expense of neglecting the issue of aesthetics, then vitalism and rationalism, which at the narrative level of literary history manifest as the principle of desire/energy of narration, i.e. as rationalistic comments that limit and direct that desire,

but also the relativization of Vuk Karadžić's work and the reforms in the sense of rejecting the absolutization of one linguistic form, represent equally important features of Skerlić's literary-historical activity.

Nikolić's scholarly attention is also directed towards the *Review of Serbian Literature* by Pavle Popović, which, involving folk, old and Dubrovnik literature as separate entities, without determining their mutual connections, is marked by the sign of syntheticness, but by the title already suggested conciseness which, although did not allow the space for the explication of the procedure of the evaluation of the work, nor for the dialogical, polemical considerations of the stated opinions of the other writers and researchers, nevertheless suggested the presence of a specific duality – striving for spontaneous hermeneutic insight and demands for the scholarliness in the spirit of positivistic objectivity. In this work, Popović adhered to the principles of systematization by genres and chronological presentation of the works within those genres, intersecting these approaches in the chapter on Dubrovnik literature, which is the most extensive and the most relevant from the aspect of novelty that he introduced it into Serbian culture. Unlike the chapter on the old literature, which pretended to define what was considered a field of philological study regarding modern approaches to literature, or the chapter on folk literature, which systematized knowledge in this area, the chapter on Dubrovnik literature implied the founding of this literature as a constitutive element of Serbian literature, while the note “To the second edition” that Dubrovnik literature can be understood as part of Serbian tradition as much as the Croatian unequivocally pointed to the problems of Serbo-Croatian relations, which Popović tried to make less visible with such a claim. Hence Nikolić concludes that the literary historian “did not use the opportunity to create the notion of the Yugoslav literature as a comparative notion based on his own conviction that Dubrovnik literature is both Serbian and Croatian as a common tradition, which would at the same time respect similarities and differences, as well as delineate the areas of conflict.”

It is precisely this question of the relationship between Serbian and Croatian literature, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was resolved by the fact that Croats in the 1930s accepted Serbian language as their literary language, including their own literary creation within Serbian literature so that later would happen the Croatian distancing from Serbian influence and rejecting Serbian name of the common language, was at the heart of the notion of the Yugoslav literature. The chapter “Yugoslav Literature: From Pan-Serbism to Self-Denial” first sheds light on Stojan Novaković's pan-Serbian point of view, who, believing that Croats are a tribe of Serbian people, accurately describes the moment of transition from Kajkavian / Croatian to Serbian / Stokavian due to the political conditioning by Hungarian pressure which the Croats could not resist by themselves (but also because of the so-called “publicity of Serbian name”). Novaković's ethno-symbolic understanding of Serbian name as another name

for the same people was opposed by the concept of the political people advocated by Vatroslav Jagić, inspired by the Hungarian class politics from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and by analogy, which could be drawn on the basis of the motto that on the Hungarian soil there can be only one, Hungarian people. Although both Novaković and Jagić mitigated their claims over time – the first tactically, believing that by avoiding frequent mention of the Serbian name, he was approaching the realization of the Serbo-Croatian unity within Serbian nation, and the second one declaratively, in order to make the Croatian point of view less visible and to act more efficiently – finally, accepting Jagić's concessions without any reservations, Novaković in a critical study on the untitled introductory text of Armin Pavić printed as part of his selection of *Folk Songs about the Battle of Kosovo from 1389* disputed the claim from his *History*, saying that no matter how tight Serbian and Croatian relation was, it has never been such that Serbian and the Croatian could be synonymous. Despite this awareness, Novaković, who replaced the pan-Serbian position with the Yugoslavism, Serbian cultural policy continued to insist on the Serbo-Croatian unity, thus subordinating the historical foundations of Serbian position to the optimistic vision of Yugoslavism, “allowing the Croatian idea to spread throughout the Shtokavian-speaking area, except with the Orthodox Serbs.”

Serbo-Croatian unity equally figured prominently as Skerlić's ideal as well: in his rationalist fervour, looking at the confessions narrowly and proclaiming a return to Dositej's ideas, Skerlić identified the vision of Yugoslavia as secular nationalism with Yugoslavism, which was under the decisive influence of the so-called liberal Catholicism among the Croats, “forgetting that for Dositej all those he united in his rational and intelligent patriotism, both the followers of the Greek and the Latin Church, were the Serbs.” Nikolić lucidly notices that Skerlić, who believed so much in the future Yugoslav unity, in his literary-historical syntheses, written exclusively from the Serbian, Orthodox point of view, did not leave a trace of that unity, neither did he advocate Dositej's ideas, religious tolerance and linguistic nationalism nor made any step towards the integration of Dubrovnik literature or regional literatures; everything was subordinated to his Yugoslav chiliastic vision.

Pavle Popović, who moved from reluctance towards Croats and advocacy for Serbian problem crossed over to the Yugoslav point of view, wrote *Yugoslav literature* in 1918, quickly published because of its subordination to the ideology of Yugoslav integralism which was the basis of the state policy; dependency by political actuality has led to the fact that the attitude towards the literary past was inevitably directed so that it only sought and highlighted the elements that could meet the demand of the current situation, and often as dominant features were emphasized characteristics of certain secondary works but significant for the notion of Yugoslav literature. According to Nikolić, this left aside the most important Serbian creators of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Zaharije

Orfelin and Jovan Rajić, only because some of their Uncatholic works did not fit into the Yugoslav literature; thus the key consequence is equally implied, because:

... if the most peculiar phenomena of Serbian literature are forgotten and the language is deprived of its national name, then the basic condition for the unity of Yugoslav literature was the abolition of Serbian literature and its important traditions: belonging to the Byzantine cultural circle when it comes to the old literature, its attachment to Russia in the XVIII century, and importance of folk literature after Vuk.

Finally, Jovan Deretić indicated two different points of view on Yugoslav literature: one, according to which Yugoslav literature exists, and certain literatures of peoples and nationalities are only its parts, and the other, which prevailed over time and according to which Yugoslav literature does not exist, but there are national literatures with the possibility of achieving different mutual relations. These relations, however, exclude double or multiple affiliations, especially in the case of Dubrovnik literature, which has been declared part of the Croatian literature and whose inclusion in Serbian tradition was considered a political offence; hence Deretić gave up on its introduction into his first *History*, while in the second he dedicated only a short chapter “A Look at Older Štokavian Literature”, giving, as Nikolić assesses, the most balanced description of Dubrovnik literature in the time after the disintegration of the SFRY: it is according to “its philological roots Serbian, Slavic in its identity, as a literary-historical formation Dalmatian, and in consonance with the basic direction of its later activity, mostly, although not exclusively, Croatian”.

In the chapter “Milorad Pavić: counterhistory”, Nikolić’s study focuses on the literary-historical thought of this author whose book *The Birth of New Serbian Literature: History of Serbian Literature of Baroque, Classicism and Pre-Romanticism*, synthetically representing Serbian literature of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, pleads for a new literary periodization performed according to the literary styles, forms, procedures and genres, and not according to the educational, philosophical, linguistic and other premises on which the earlier periodizations of Serbian literature were based. Resisting the determination of the value of Serbian literature according to Vuk as a landmark, but also Skerlić’s literary-historical conceptions, especially emphasising the ideas in literature, Pavić’s prominently aesthetic notion of the values of Serbian literature was built through resistance to what he recognized as the dominant current of Serbian literary historiography so Nikolić defines his literary-historical endeavour as a counter-history of Serbian literature, which, by rejecting the wide-spread literary-historical tradition, resembles Denis Hollier’s *New History of French Literature*. Bearing in mind Pavić’s request to look for stylistic and formal connections between different periods of Serbian literature, Nikolić also notes the weaknesses of this approach: on the

one hand, Pavić's neglect of the peculiarities and the context of the epochs at the expense of establishing literary connections and integralist literary-historical story which, however, is not characterized by the integrity because it does not include the old literature or the works after pre-romanticism, but indirectly implies them, while, on the other hand, in the way Pavić presents today's literary significance of the works from the past, the author recognizes forgeries (one of them is described in the case of Pavić's views on the song "Kant on the Memories of Death" by Jovan Rajić) initiated by the desire to modernize Serbian literary past. Hence, the author of the study concludes: "In the entire history of Serbian literary historiography, there is no more unreliable literary historian than Pavić." In a very critical manner, Nikolić also considers Pavić's views on Serbian literature of the Baroque period, pointing to the indefiniteness of the notion of the Baroque style, extensive socio-historical excursions despite the proclamation of the aesthetic criterion, reducing the aesthetic to formalism (visible in the division of Orfelin's poetry on the basis of versification principles, which overshadows other characteristics of Orfelin's poetry), as well as overly loose interpretations or substantiation of the claims with the unexplained, extensive quotations whose origin is not indicated. Nikolić also notices the weaknesses of Pavić's literary-historical thought in the constant changes of the periodization terms (sentimentalism, pre-romanticism), insufficiently precisely defined determinant of romanticism, the indistinguishability of types of sensitivity in sentimentalism and romanticism (shown on the example of Pavić's perception of the motif of a dead darling in Pačić and Kostić) which altogether resulted in Nikolić's judgment on the incomprehensibility of Pavić's literary-historical systematization.

The chapter "Jovan Deretić: The Search for Unity – Between Geometrism and Narrative" sheds light on Deretić's literary-historical-poetic arc composed of the first *History of Serbian Literature*, the works *The Path of Serbian Literature: Identity, Boundaries, Aspirations, Poetics of Serbian Literature* and other *History of Serbian Literature* in which are outlined the most important problems of the tradition of Serbian literary historiography, seen through the question of the unity of Serbian literature. The general considerations of the nature of literature, history and nation of Jovan Deretić, a literary historian who, in Nikolić's opinion, in spite of certain problematic places in his works, nevertheless considered Serbian literature the most thoroughly and the most extensively, are extremely objectivistic so the need for a unique, interpretive literary-historical story that establishes the identity of Serbian literature was constantly subordinated to the idea of discovering the deep structure of Serbian literature, intending to make visible, what has always been present in a hidden form. Deretić's literary-historical postulates rely both on the thesis of the existence of two comparative conceptions of a national literature – it exists through an institutionalized literary-historical story, which points to Deretić's modern consciousness, but also to the ever-present entity, a concept

close to the romantic understanding of national literature as well as to the principle of duality, the concept according to which everything between the poles has the status of an intermediate position acting as an outcome of “combinatorics within a closed system.” Pointing to the non-unique criterion of periodization in the first, and especially the second *History of Serbian Literature*, Nikolić meticulously illuminates and comments the characteristics of Deretić’s views presented on each individual period of Serbian literature: from the old Serbian literature, creation during Turkish rule, views on the older Shtokavian literature, folk literature, through the new literature and within it the Enlightenment and the Baroque, Classicism and Pre-Romanticism, Romanticism (whose understanding he revised in the other *History*, and he not only accepted Herder’s idea of the national spirit but also the manifestation of the romantic individuality and subjectivism) and Realism all the way to modern, avant-garde and new realisms, as well as the literature of the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time, Nikolić sheds light on other specifics of Deretić’s literary-historical thought, such as its distinct historicity, the status of Sterija’s poetry, the reasons for the impossibility of accepting Romantic irony or Crnjanski’s late works, the equalization of the ranks of Crnjanski and Andrić in the second *History*, but also the advantages that Deretić’s literary-historical activity accomplishes over Pavić’s literary-historical reflection. Following the history of the Serbian literary-historical ideas showed not only how the concepts of the identity of Serbian literature differed in the works of the thematized authors, their thoughts on its borders, development and values, but also revealed cohesive points of their thinking, such as the Romantic notion of the substantiality of Serbian national literature, which Deretić defended with modern methodology, while the literary-historical conceptualizations of Jovan Skerlić and Popović pretended to desacralize it. By detailed consideration of the works of Serbian literary historians, offering arguments and pointing out the weaknesses and contradictions in their presentations, and building space for new views and problematization of Serbian literary history practice, marking at the same time the flexibility of narrative presentation of the literary past as a key feature of a future, postmodern literary historian, Nikolić’s book shows how Serbian literary history lasts through re-examining complex representations created by the intersection of different perspectives which, distancing themselves from any definition and finality, provide rethinking, enrichment and re-literary-historical narration, a more truthful existence of Serbian literary history as an open story.

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## “ELEUSINIAN DEER” IN FRONT OF MIRRORS

*Poetry of Dragan Jovanović Danilov*, proceedings, Library Zmaj Award, Matica Srpska, Novi Sad 2014

Every single thing in the world is like a book to us,  
it is a letter and a mirror.

Alan de Lille

Among the winners of the Matica Srpska Zmaj Award, which has been given since 1953, was the poet of “ephemeral themes: cellars, wells, dovecotes, ravens, cats” in 2005 (as stated in the second introductory word of the proceedings entitled “Poem and its echo”), Dragan Jovanović Danilov, for the book of poetry *Nest over the Abyss*, which in his first word Milosav Tešić defined as “a poetic action with living canvases which can be seen through and which quiver”. From the award dedicated to Zmaj, whose portrait looks at us from the cover, came out these proceedings, consisting of five segments: two named words, critical articles about the poet’s work, articles for photobiography, materials for bibliography and the articles that make a note about the award, minutes from the jury meeting and a list of the previous winners.

The central part of the proceedings makes a contribution to Danilov’s photobiography (although the photographs are also among the critical articles), titled after the recently published author’s book *Symmetry of the Whirlpool* (2014). These fragments, separated by three stars, which vary in some places (“the ideal is being able to repeat oneself... like Bach”), are actually mostly parts of the interviews that Danilov gave to Zoran Jeremić, Zvonko Prijović and Zoran Hr. Radisavljević for the Chronicle of the Matica srpska (books 484, vols. 1-2, July-August 2009, 139–156), where the stars replace the questions. The poet, in the whirlpool of his autopoetic reflections, once again “mixing up” his own “basic belief”, reveals that he has always been “interested in those untold stories, secret stories that people do not want to confide to anyone”, which are “hidden in dreams and dark mirrors of the unconscious”, and he shared with the readers an intimate record of an Italian woman, a student of literature, who testifies to her love for Danilov’s poems, which are loved as the dolls are loved in the childhood. This part of the collection consists of about thirty pages that, like a mirror in the middle of an hourglass, divide it into almost two equal parts – one with a focus on the critical texts, the other with a focus on the impressive bibliography, composed by Slađana Subašić and Gordana Đilas.

The significance of the focus of the proceedings, based primarily on the scientific works of eleven admirers of poetry, becomes more pronounced when reviewing the part of the bibliography that refers to the reception of the works of Dragan Jovanović Danilov. It is noticeable that out of more than 550

references, only twenty refer to somewhat more extensive essays or more serious studies on the poet, and everything else consists mainly of reviews, shorter articles, newspaper reviews and the like. This actually suggests us that only other invisible proceedings of more serious, honest works about Danilov can be imagined outside of these proceedings. We would not count the theme in the May-June issue of *Polja* for 2012, which is, so to speak, scarce: a few reprinted reviews, Albahari's one-page note ("Danilov and His Cave"), two translated prefaces from the Romanian and Italian which hardly contain three pages of the text together... with the exception of Saša Radojčić's essay "Aesthetic and Existential", originally printed in Danilov's book *Wine from the Volcano* (2012), then in *Polja* and for the third time under the auspices of the proceedings *Poetry by Dragan Jovanović Danilov*.

However, the skilfully arranged concept of the proceedings required that Radojčić's work, which says about Danilov's poem that it is "an anthem that celebrates the world and its erotic and aesthetic capabilities, and seeks to restore the aura of its former sacral power to poetry". This point of view is somewhat continued on the foundation study of these proceedings, "The aestheticization and sacralization of reality in the poetry of Dragan Jovanović Danilov: poetic identity and longing for change" by Ivan Negrišorac, which points to the strategy of permeating the religious and aesthetic sphere of reality, as a specific form of the "religiously unconscious" of which Epstein spoke and finally concludes that "sacredness is the ultimate purpose of the aesthetic ecstasies". The basic poetic characteristics of Danilov's poetry, which were indicated by Negrišorac and Radojčić, were named in Đorde Despić's work "On the Words in the Mirror" as a poetic continuity between the two phases of the poet's work: Baroque budding and the other discursive, more veristic one.

Despić's work opens the space to talk about the scientific contribution of the proceedings on the level of the idea that is created by reading all the critical texts. Namely, it is a metaphor of a mirror, which is more or less indirectly mentioned by all the authors. In that sense, seen through the eyes of synthesis, it is possible to draw a draft for the typology of Danilov's metaphors of the mirror, in front of which the "Eleusinian deer" would symbolically stand as one of the frequent lyrical subjects of his poetry.

Negrišorac mentions the periscope from the poem "Self-portrait in the mirror of the periscope" as an effective motif used to illuminate an other-worldly being. For Despić, the mirror is a projection of the irrational, it is reflected as internal, unspeakable; the mirror is a metaphor for a lyrical text, its power lies in the psychological encounter of reception and creation, seen in the light of Blum's antithetical critique. Sonja Veselinović drew analogies between the city, the body and the ship/boat: "The city is indicated in its corporeality, which allows it to understand the subject's desires since they are projected on it." Hence, the city becomes a mirror of the longing of the

lyrical subject who seeks refuge, tucking up and the “absolute embrace of coitus”, in order to find it in a woman’s body.

The topic “Eternal femininity: a woman in the poetry of D.J. Danilov” was thoroughly explored by Dragana V. Todoreskov through Danilov’s “holy trinity: wife, daughter, mother”, performing the following typology: mothers, breastfeeders, girls, “sluts” (prostitutes). The scientist saw in the poet’s motif of the breast (wide-eyed, omniscient, omnipotent, lethal, comforting, bearer of the cosmic order and metaphor of the universe) she also saw giving meaning to the existence, the combination of sacredness and sexuality and the place where the process of self-realization takes place, and thus indirectly indicated to us that the breasts are also a kind of mirror for self-contemplation.

The counterpoint to breast-mirrors is a comparative study by Mina M. Đurić “Danilov and Or in Narcissus’ *Camera obscura*”. Or’s and Danilov’s mirror are the same: black and screened, and it “reflects *the nature of the mirroring itself*”: “In Danilov’s achievement, the lyrical subject addresses the mirror and water as the entity of a poem, apparition and prophecy. In Or’s poem, something else is addressing to Narcissus, and that other can be interpreted as another side of “a poem”, or another side of a poet who separates himself from the mythical figure of Narcissus “.

In the text “Abyss and Vision”, analysing several verses from the collection *Memoirs of Sand* (2008), Stevan Bradić recognizes “a continuation of the strategy of modernism which, defending the autonomy of poetry, opposed the logic of spectacle and mass culture” in Danilov’s poetics, with a focus in the verses: “I crossed the bridge over the abyss, / but I did not remove the abyss”. Through Pindar’s hubris “wishing beyond boundaries”, the author drew the arc of Danilov’s hubris – to remove the abyss, although the abyss and the man are directed at each other as a man who self-realizes / contemplates, tries to perceive the obscure part of his soul. “Walking over the abyss is, in the light of Heraclitus’ fragment, walking towards the ‘limits of the soul’, which cannot be reached”, and “‘our souls’ is the depth ‘for itself’, while the abyss is the depth ‘by itself’, and the poem is ‘the completion of the abyss’”.

After “Abyss and Vision”, one can read “Ocean of Heart” by Vasa Pavković and “Two Literary Responses” by Aleksandar B. Laković: one refers to the ocean in which Danilov’s “eclecticism of difference” is reflected (he loves both Popa and Pavlović, Davičo and Lalić, Rimbaud and Valery, Bach and Schubert) and shares with us common passions with the poet (libraries, antique shops, books, shells, women); others see the book as the poet’s equivalent and symbol of existence, and in that sense, the book becomes a space in which a man is reflected. However, paradoxically, the mirror is also “whiteness, the space of impossibility of self-identification”, as Vasilije Domazet points out in the work “Poetics of Paradox in ‘Memoirs of Sand’ by D. J. Danilov”.

How finally to understand this multitude of semantization of the mirror metaphor, i.e. new metaphors for the typically Baroque metaphor of the mirror?

Perhaps the last critical article in the proceedings, “Relation to Tradition in the ‘House of Bach’s Music’” by Nikola Živanović, can offer one of the acceptable answers: “In his best poems, Danilov uses whole descriptions and even entire poems as metaphors for different reality. These are not allegories. The meaning of the metaphor is obtained only when the image is shaped (...) Danilov’s Baroqueness does not mean anything else than that his metaphors need a lot of words. Hence their originality”. This aesthetic abundance in a dehumanized world devoid of any meaning can be encouraging and is precious, as stated by Negrišorac in the introductory study reflected in Živanović’s in that aspect of baroqueness that encompasses the “diversity of the world”, the spirit of the time (melting pot) at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps with the abundance culminates in “abyss” (the poem is the completion of the abyss), perhaps it is the poet’s response to Helderlin’s remarkable split between the world and the poet: “why do we need poets in scarce times?” which is potentially abolished by poetry. A significant study by Vladimir Gvozden and Slobodan Vladušić “Poetic Subject, Enrichment, Travel: the Modernity of Rastko Petrović” (*Proceedings of the Matica Srpska Journal of Literature and Language*, 61/2, 2013) states that “the idea of enrichment stems from the poet’s desire to place himself in the modern world”, i.e. that this metaphor strongly resonates on the “essence of Holderlin’s metaphor of the needy world”, and that “it is the obligation of future poets (...) to rediscover the essence of poetry in a modern way, over and over again”.

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NIN Award for Novel (1994–1996, 2001, 2004–2006). Brajović writes verse, literary studies, essays and reviews. Book of poetry: *Gladi* [Famines, 1982]. Books published: *Kontroverzni metatekst: ogledi* [Controversial Metatext: Essays, 1992]; *Poetika žanra* [Genre Poetics, 1995]; *Od metafore do pesme* [From Metaphor to Poem, 1998]; *Teorija pesničke slike* [A Theory of Poetic Imagery, 2000]; *Oblici modernizma* [The Forms of Modernism, 2005]; *Identično različito: komparativno-imagološki ogled* [The Identically Different: A Comparative-Imagological Essay, 2007]; *Kratka istorija preobilja: kritički bedeker kroz savremenu srpsku poeziju i prozu* [A Short History of Overabundance: A Critical Baedeker through the Contemporary Serbian Poetry and Fiction, 2009]; *Zaborav i ponavljanje: ambivalentno lice moderniteta u romanu Na Drini čuprija* [Oblivion and Repetition: The Ambivalent Face of Modernity in the Novel The Bridge on the Drina, 2009]; *Fikcija i moć: ogledi o subverzivnoj imaginaciji Ive Andrića* [Fiction and Power: Essays on the Subversive Imagination of Ivo Andrić, 2011]; *Komparativni identiteti: srpska književnost između evropskog i južnoslovenskog konteksta* [Comparative Identities: The Serbian Literature between the European and the South Slav Contexts, 2012]; *Narcisov paradoks: problem pesničke samosvesti i srpska lirika modernog doba* (evropski i južnoslovenski kontekst) [The Paradox of Narcissus: The Issue of Poets' Self-Consciousness and the Serbian Modern-Age Lyrical Poetry (The European and the South Slav Contexts), 2013]; *Groznica i podvig: ogledi o erotskoj imaginaciji u književnom delu IVE Andrića* [Fever and Feat: Essays on the Erotic Imagination in the Literary Oeuvre of Ivo Andrić, 2015]; *Identično različito: komparativno-imagološki ogled* [The Identically Different: A Comparative-Imagological Essay, 2020].

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**DRAGAN JOVANOVIĆ DANILOV** (b. Požega, 1960) writes verse, fiction, essays, literary and art reviews. Books of poetry: *Euharistija* [Eucharist, 1990]; *Enigme noći* [Nighttime Enigmas, 1991]; *Pentagram srca* [The Pentagram of the Heart, 1992]; *Kuća Bahove muzike* [The Home of Bach's Music, 1993]; *Zivi pergament* [Living Parchment, 1994]; *Evropa pod snegom* [Snow-Clad Europe, 1995]; *Duboka tišina* [Profound Silence, 1996]; *Pantokr(e)ator* [The Pantocr(e)ator, 1997]; *Glava harsfe* [The Crown of the Harp, co-authored with D. Vuksanović, 1998]; *Alkoholi s juga* [The Spirits from the South, 1999]; *U ružinom ogledalu* [In the Rosewood Mirror, 2001]; *Koncert za nikog* [A Concert for Nobody, 2001]; *Najlepše pesme Dragana Jovanovića Danilova* [The Most Appealing Poems by Dragan Jovanović Danilov, 2002]; *Homer predgrađa* [Homer of the Suburb, 2003]; *Gnezdo nad ponorom* [The Nest over an Abyss, 2005]; *Memoari peska* [The Memoirs of Sand, 2008]; *Vatra ispod snega* [Fire under Snow, 2010]; *Moja tačna priviđenja* [My True Illusions, 2010]; *Kad nevine duše odlaze* [When Innocent Souls Depart, 2011]; *Vino s vulkana* [The Wine from a Volcano, 2012]; *Simetrija vrtloga* [The Symmetry of a Whirlpool, 2014]; *Govoriti s vodopadima* [Talking with Waterfalls, 2016]; *Um podivljale reke* [The Mind of a Raging River, 2018]; *Čuvat beležnice: izabrane i nove pesme* [Notebook Keeper: Selected and New Poems, 2019]. Novels: *Almanah peščanih dina* [The Almanac of Sand Dunes, 1996]; *Ikonostas na kraju sveta* [An Iconostasis at the End of the World, 1998]; *Otac ledenih brda* [The Father of Icebergs, 2009]; *Talasi beogradskog mora* [The Waves of Belgrade's Sea, 2013]; *Šta sneg priča* [What Tales the Snow Tells, 2016]. Books of essays: *Srce okeana* [The Heart of the Ocean, 1999]; *Duhovi Balkana* [The Genii from the Balkans, 2019].

**SVETOZAR KOLJEVIĆ** (Banja Luka, BiH, 1930 – Novi Sad, Serbia, 2016). Anglist, written studies, essays, criticism and literature reviews, translated from English, academician. Published books: *Trijumf inteligencije* [Triumph of Intelligence, 1963]; *Humor i mit* [Humor and myth, 1968]; *Naš junački ep* [Our heroine epic, 1974]; *Putevi reči* [Ways to say, 1978]; *The Epic in the Making*, 1980; *Pripovetke Ive Andrića* [Ivo Andrić's Novels, 1983]; *Engleska književnost 3* [English Literature 3 (group of authors), 1984]; *Vidjenja i snoviđenja* [Visions and Dreams, 1986]; *Hirovi romana* [A novel of the novel, 1988]; *Pripovetka 1945–1980* [The Novel, 1945–1980, 1991]; *Po belom svetu-zapisu i sećanja* [In the White World – Records and Memories, 1997]; *Postanje epa* [Becoming an epic, 1998]; *Englesko-srpski rečnik* [English-Serbian Dictionary (co-author I. Đurić Paunović), 1999]; *Engleski pesnici dvadesetog veka (1914–1980) – od Wilfreda Ovena do Filipa Larkina* [English poets of the twentieth century (1914–1980) – from Wilfred Owen to Philip Larkin, 2002]; *Engleski romansijeri dvadesetog veka (1914–1960) – od Džejsma Džojsa do Vilijama Goldinga* [English Romanesque Twentieth Century (1914–1960) – from James Joyce to William Golding, 2003]; *Vječna zublja – odjeci usmene u pisanoj književnosti* [Eternal Eyes – Echoes of Oral in Written Literature, 2005];

*Vavilonski izazovi – o susretima različitih kultura u književnosti* [Babylonian Challenges – Encounters of Different Cultures in Literature, 2007]; *Odjeci reči* [Echoes of the Word, 2009]; *Između zavičaja i tuđine – susreti različitih kultura u srpskoj književnosti* [Between the homeland and the alien – encounters of different cultures in Serbian literature, 2015]; *Džozef Konrad: čovek i umetnik* [Joseph Conrad: Man and Artist, 2016].

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**IVAN NEGRIŠORAC** (b. Trstenik, Serbia, 1956). Author of poetry, fiction, plays and literary reviews. From 2005 to 2012, he was the Editor-in-Chief of *Letopis Matice srpske*; in 2012, elected President of the Matica srpska. Books of poetry: *Trula jabuka* [Rotting Apple, 1981]; *Rakljari. Želudac* [Dowser. Stomach, 1983]; *Zemljopis* [Soil-Survey, 1986]; *Abrakadabra* [Abracadabra,

1990]; *Toplo, hladno* [Hot, Cold, 1990]; *Hop* [Hop-Skipping, 1993]; *Veznici* [Conjunctions, 1995]; *Prilozi* [Adverbs/Contributions, 2002]; *Potajnik* [The Mole, 2007]; *Svetilnik* [The Torchbearer, 2010]; *Kamena čtenija* [Petrographic Readings, 2013]; *Čtenija* [Readings, selected verse, 2015]; *Matični mleč* [Bee Bread, 2016]; *Izložba oblaka (izbor i nove)* [Cloud Exhibition (Choice and New), 2017]; *Ogledala Oka Nedremana* [Mirrors of the Eye of Sleepless, 2019]. Novel: *Andjeli umiru* [Angels Are Dying, 1998]. Plays: *Fredi umire* [Freddy's Dying, 1987]; *Kuc-kuc* [Knock-Knock, 1989]; *Istraga je u toku, zar ne?* [The Investigation's Under Way, Isn't It?, 2000]; *Vidiš li svice na nebū* [Do You See the Fireflies in the Sky?, 2006]. Studies: *Legitimacija za beskućnike. Srpska neoavangardna poezija – poetički identitet i razlike* [ID for the Homeless. Serbian Neo-Avant-Garde Poetry: Poetic Identity and Differences, 1996]; *Lirska aura Jovana Dučića* [The Lyrical Aura of Jovan Dučić, 2009]; *Istraga predaka – iskušenja kolektivnog i individualnog opstanka* [Ancestral Investigation – The Temptations of Collective and Individual Survival, 2018]; *Njegoševski pokret otpora* [The Resistance of Njegos's movement, 2020]. Negrišorac chairs the Editorial Board of *Srpska Enciklopedija* (*A Serbian Encyclopedia*) Book 1, Vols. 1-2 (2010-11); Book 2 (2013); Book 3, Vol.1 (2018).

**MIHAJLO PANTIĆ** (b. Belgrade, Serbia, 1957) is an author of short stories, literary reviews, essays and studies. Books of short stories: *Hronika sobe* [The Chronicle of a Room, 1984]; *Vonder u Berlinu* [Wonder in Berlin, 1987]; *Pesnici, pisci & ostala menažerija* [Poets, Writers & the Rest of the Menagerie, 1992]; *Ne mogu da se setim jedne rečenice* [I Can't Remember One Sentence, 1993]; *Novobeogradske priče* [New Belgrade Stories, 1994]; *Sedmi dan košave* [The Seventh Day of the Koshava Wind, 1999]; *Jutro posle* [The Morning After, 2001]; *Ako je to ljubav* [If That Is Love, 2003]; *Najlepše priče Mihajla Pantića* [The Most Appealing Stories by Mihajlo Pantić, 2004]; *Žena u muškim cipelama – the Best of* [Woman in Men's Shoes – the Best of, selected short stories, 2006]; *Prvih deset godina* [The First Ten Years, 2006]; *Ovoga puta o bolu* [This Time about Pain, 2007]; *Sve priče Mihajla Pantića I-IV* [All Stories by Mihajlo Pantić I-IV, 2007]; *Priče na putu* [Stories on the Road, 2010]; *Hodanje po oblacima* [Walking across the Clouds, 2013]; *Ako je to ljubav* [If That Is Love, 2014]; *Vonder u Berlinu* [Wonder in Berlin, 2015]; *Sedmi dan košave* [The Seventh Day of the Koshava Wind, 2015]; *Ovoga puta o bolu* [This Time about Pain, 2016]; *Novobeogradske priče* [New Belgrade Stories, 2016]; *Kada me ugleda ono što tražim* [When I'm Spotted by What I'm Looking For, 2017]. Studies, reviews, essays, criticism, travelogues: *Iskušenja sažetosti* [The Temptations of Conciseness, 1984]; *Aleksandrijski sindrom I–4* [Alexandrian Syndrome I–4, 1987, 1994, 1999, 2003]; *Protiv sistematičnosti* [Opposing Systematicness, 1988]; *Šum Vavilona* [Babylon Noise, co-authored with V. Pavković, 1988]; *Deset pesama, deset razgovora* [Ten Poems, Ten Conversations, co-authored with S. Zubanović, 1992]; *Novi prilozi za savremenu*

srpsku poeziju [New Contributions to the Contemporary Serbian Poetry, 1994]; *Puzzle*, 1995; *Šta čitam i šta mi se događa* [What I Read and What Happens to Me, 1998]; *Kiš*, 1998; *Modernističko pripovedanje* [Modernist Storytelling, 1999]; *Tortura teksta (Puzzle II)* [Tortured by Text (Puzzle II), 2000]; *Ogledi o svakodnevici (Puzzle III)* [Essays on the Quotidian(Puzzle III), 2001]; *Svet iza sveta* [A World Behind the World, 2002]; *Kapetan sobne plovidbe (Puzzle IV)* [Room-Based Shipmaster (Puzzle IV), 2003]; *Svakodnevnik čitanja* [Logbook of Reading, 2004]; *Život je upravo u toku (Puzzle II)* [Life Is Just Afoot(Puzzle V), 2005]; *Pisci govore* [Writers Talking, 2007]; *Drugi svet iza sveta* [Another World Behind the World, 2009]; *Neizgubljeno vreme* [The Unwasted Time, 2009]; *Slankamen (PuzzleVI)*, 2009; *Dnevnik jednog uživaoca čitanja* [Diary of a Reading Addict, 2009]; *A Short History of Serbian Literature* (by a group of authors), 2011; *Biti rokenrol* [Being Rock-’n’-Roll, co-authored with P. Popović, 2011 ]; *Stan bez adrese (Puzzle VII)* [An Apartment with No Address (Puzzle VII), 2014]; *Od stiha do stiha – svet iza sveta 3* [From One Verse Line to Another: A World Behind the World 3, 2014]; *Priče od vode – sve ribe Srbije* [Stories Derived from Water: All of Serbia’s Fish, co-authored with M. Tucović, 2014]; *Osnovi srpskog pripovedanja* [The Basics of Serbian Storytelling, 2015]; *Šta čitam i šta mi se događa* [What I Read and What Happens to Me, 2016]; *Solvitur scribendo: osmi puzzle* [Solvitur scribendo (Puzzle VIII), 2019]; *Šta čitam i šta mi se događa: (lični azbučnik pisaca).* 5, *Čitanje, drugi život* [What I Read and What Happens to Me: (personal alphabet of writers). 5, *Reading, Another Life*, 2019]. Pantić has edited numerous books, anthologies and proceedings.

**MARKO PAOVICA** (b. Cibrijan near Trebinje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1950) is an author of literary reviews and essays about the contemporary Serbian literature. Books published: *Rasponi prozne reči – o proznim knjigama savremenih srpskih pisaca* [The Spans of Prose Word: On the Books of Fiction by Contemporary Serbian Writers, 2005]; *Aretejev luk* [Aretaeus’ Bow, 2009]; *Orfej na stolu – ogledi o savremenim srpskim pesnicima* [Orpheus on the Table: Essays on Contemporary Serbian Poets, 2011]; *Metakritički izleti* [Metacritical Excursions, 2017].

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2012]; *Prozor u dvorište* [Rear Window, 2017]; *Doba heroja* [An Age of Heroes, 2018]. Dr. Paunović has edited a number of books.

**VELJKO PETROVIĆ** (Sombor, 1884 – Belgrade, 1967) was member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, writer and art historian, director of the National Museum in Belgrade. He attended Sombor's grammar school in the Hungarian-language class. In 1902, he arrived in Budapest to study law there; during the studies he was a boarder at the first Serbian college, the *Tekelianum* institute founded by Sava Tekelija. Petrović was editor of several literary magazines: *Kroacija*, *Srbobran*, *Sloboda* and *Srpska riječ*. In 1936, he was elected full member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences. His oeuvre includes poetry, short stories, other short pieces, essays, articles and studies in literature and art. Books of poetry: *Rodoljubive pesme* [Patriotic Poems, 1912]; *Na pragu: knjiga stihova: 1904–1912* [On the Threshold: A Book of Verse: 1904–1912, 1913]; *Stihovi: izbor iz knjiga "Rodoljubive pesme"*, "Na pragu" i neki od novijih [Verse: A Selection from the Books "Patriotic Verse", "On the Threshold" and Some Recent Poems, 1951]; *Nevidljivi izvor* [The Invisible Well, 1956]; *Pesme-Eseji* [Poem-Essays, 1963]; *Krilata grudva zemlje: nove pesme* [A Winged Lump of Soil: New Poems, 1965]; *Pesme za decu i o deci* [Poems for and about Children, 1965]. Books of short stories: *Bunja i drugi u Ravangradu: predratna pričanja* [Bunja and Others in Ravangrad:<sup>1</sup> Pre-War Stories, 1921]; *Varljivo proleće: deset pripovedaka* [Deceptive Spring: Ten Short Stories, 1921]; *Pomerene savesti: deset pripovedaka* [Shift-ing Consciences: Ten Short Stories, 1922]; *Tri pripovetke: Džafer Rizvanpašić – Moloh – Salašar* [Three Short Stories: Džafer Rizvanpašić – Moloch – The Farmer, 1922]; *Iskušenje: petnaest pripovedaka* [Temptation: Fifteen Short Stories, 1924]; *Pripovetke* [Short Stories, 1925]; *Pripovetke, knj. 2* [Short Stories, Vol. 2, 1934]; *Izabrane pripovetke* [Selected Short Stories, 1948]; *Prepelica u ruci i druge slične pripovetke* [A Quail in the Hand and Other Similar Stories, 1948]; *Baba Maca: pripovetke* [Grandma Maca: Short Stories, 1950]; *Pripovetke* [Short Stories, 1950]; *Tri pripovetke* [Three Short Stories, 1951]; *Četrnaest pripovedaka* [Fourteen Short Stories, 1951]; *Pripovetke* [Short Stories, 1952]; *Odabранe pripovetke* [Selected Short Stories, 1960]; *Moloh: izabrane pripovetke* [Moloch: Selected Short Stories, 1963]; *Pesma u podne i druge pripovetke* [The Midday Poem and Other Short Stories, 1966]. Other books: *Srpska umetnost u Vojvodini: od doba despota do ujedinjenja* [Serbian Art in Vojvodina: From the Time of the Despots to Unification, co-authored with Milan Kašanin, 1927]; *Šumadija i Vojvodina* [Šumadija and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ravangrad* is an unofficial Serb name for the town of Sombor; literally, it means ‘flatland town’. The title of the opening story “Bunja” is a short form of Bunjevac; the Bunjevci are an ethnic community mostly living in the north of Bačka, rather large in number in and around the city of Sombor. – *Translator’s note*.

*Vojvodina*, 1930]; *Vuk i naša novija lepa književnost* [Vuk<sup>2</sup> and Our Recent Belles-Lettres, 1937]; *Vukovi, Brankovi i Daničićevi portreti* [The Portraits of Vuk, Branko and Daničić<sup>3</sup>, 1947]; *Vremena i događaji* [Times and Events, 1954]; *Varljivo proleće* [Deceptive Spring, 1954]; *Zemlja* [Land, 1955]; *Izdanici iz opaljena grma* [Shoots from a Burning Stump, 1955]; *Razgovoru nikad kraja* [Conversation with No End in Sight, 1956]; *O književnosti i književnicima* [On Literature and Authors, 1958]; *Dah života* [The Breath of Life, 1964]. Complete works of Veljko Petrović have seen several editions.

**ISIDORA SEKULIĆ** (Mošorin, 1877 – Belgrade, 1958) was an author and the first female member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She was educated in Novi Sad (Girls' High School), Sombor (Serbian Teacher Training School – *Preparandija*) and Budapest (*Pedagogium*), whereafter, from 1897 to 1909, she worked as a teacher at Pančevo's Girls' High School. In 1898, Sekulić passed an exam for the licence to teach French and literature at secondary schools. Later, she worked in Šabac (1909–1912) and Belgrade. She was conferred doctoral degree in Germany (1922) and became the first president of the Writers' Association of Serbia. As the first female member of the Serbian Royal Academy, she was elected correspondent member in 1939, and in 1950 became a full member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences. Isidora Sekulić wrote fiction, travelogues, literary and other essays. Books published: *Saputnici* [Companions, fiction stories, 1913]; *Pisma iz Norveške* [Letters from Norway, travelogue, 1914]; *Iz prošlosti* [From the Past, short-form fiction], 1919]; *Milan Rakić* [essay, 1938]; *Analitički trenutci i teme*, knj. 1–3 [Some Moments and Topics Analyzed, Vols. 1–3, 1941–1943]; *Propercije, rimski elegičar: sa poslednjom svojom elegijom* [Propertius, Roman Elegist: With His Last Elegy, 1941]; *Zapisи* [Notes, 1941]; *Zapisи o mome narodu* [Notes about My People, 1948]; *Njegošu: knjiga duboke odanosti* [To Njegoš: A Book of Deep Devotion, 1951]; *Šumanovići* [The Šumanović Family, 1952]; *Govor i jezik, kulturna smotra naroda* [Vernacular and Language: A Cultural Survey of the People, 1956]; *Mir i nemir: ogledni radovi* [Peace and Anxiety: essayistic writings, 1957]; *Iz stranih književnosti*, knj. 1–2 [From Foreign Literatures, Vols. 1–2, 1962]; *Teme* [Some Topics, 1962]; *Iz domaćih književnosti*, knj. 1–2 [From Local Literatures, Vols. 1–2, 1964]; *Služba: 1894–1958* [Service: 1894–1958, 1966]; *Eseji*, knj. 1–2 [Essays, Vols. 1–2, 1967]; *Ogledi i zapisi* [Essays and Notes, 1971]; *Proza* [Fiction, 1971]; *Kritički radovi Isidore Sekulić* [Critical Writings by Isidora Sekulić, 1977]. Book of short stories:

<sup>2</sup> **Vuk** refers to Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1964). – *Translator's note*.

<sup>3</sup> **Branko** refers to the poet Branko Radičević (1824-1853); **Daničić** refers to the philologist Djura Daničić (1825-1882). They were both contemporaries of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. All three played historic roles in the development of the standard Serbian language as we know it today, owing to the synergism of their work. – *Translator's note*.

*Kronika palanačkog groblja* [*The Chronicle of a Small-Town Graveyard*, 1940]. Novel: *Dakon Bogorodičine crkve* [*The Deacon of the Virgin's Church*, 1919]. She edited a number of books by domestic and foreign authors. Her *Sabrana dela* (*Collected Works*) have repeatedly been published.

**STEVAN TONTIĆ** (b. Grdanovci near Sanski Most, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1946) writes poetry, fiction, essays and travelogues; he also translates from German. Books of verse: *Nauka o duši i druge vesele price* [*The Science of the Soul and Other Amusing Stories*, 1970]; *Tajna prepiska* [*Secret Correspondence*, 1976]; *Naše gore vuk* [*The Wolf of Our Mount*, 1976]; *Hulim i posvećujem* [*I Blaspheme and Sanctify*, 1977]; *Crna je mati nedjelja* [*Sunday's a Gloomy Matron*, 1983]; *Tajna prepiska i druge pjesme* [*Secret Correspondence and Other Poems*, 1985]; *Prag* [*The Threshold*, 1986]; *Ring* [*The Ring*, 1987]; *Izabrane pjesme* [*Selected Verse*, 1988]; *Sarajevski rukopis* [*The Sarajevo Manuscript*, 1993]; *Lirika* (izbor) [*Lyric Poetry* (a selection), 1995]; *Moj psalam / Mein Psalm* [*My Psalm*, 1997]; *Olujno jato* [*A Storm-Stricken Flock* (a selection), 2000]; *Sonntag in Berlin* [*Sundays in Berlin*, 2000]; *Blagoslov izgnanstva* [*The Blessing of Exile*, 2001]; *Sarajevski rukopis – 33 izabrane pjesme / Handschrift aus Sarajevo – 33 ausgewählte Gedichte* [*The Sarajevo Manuscript – 33 Selected Poems*, 2005]; *Sveto i prokleti* [*The Holy and the Damned*, 2009]; *Andeo mi banu kroz rešetke* [*An Angel Came to Me Bursting In through the Bars*, 2010]; *Vjerna zvijezda / Верна ћа звезда* [*The Truehearted Star* (bilingual Serbian & Macedonian edition), 2012]; *Svakodnevni smak svijeta* [*Daily End of the World*, 2013]; *Der tägliche Weltuntergang* [*Daily End of the World* (German edition), 2015]; *Bezumni plamen: izabrane i nove ljubavne pjesme* [*Unsound Fire: Selected and New Love Poems*, 2015]; *Hristova luda* [*Christ's Fool*, 2017]. Novel: *Tvoje srce, zeko* [*Your Heart, Bunny*, 1998]. Books of essays and travelogues: *Im Auftrag des Wortes – Texte aus dem Exil* [*By Order of the Word: Writings from Exile*, 2004]; *Ta mjesto – putopisi (u prozi i stihu)* [*Those Places – Travel Notes (in Prose and Verse)*, 2018]; *Kočićeva i srpska trauma* [*The Trauma of Kočić and the Serbs*, 2018]. In the year 2009, his *Selected Works 1–4* appeared: *Poezija / Poetry*, *Tvoje srce, zeko / Your Heart, Bunny*, *Jezik i neizrecivo – pesnički portreti / Language and the Un-speakable*, *Po nalozima poezije / By Order of Poetry*. Tontić has edited a number of anthologies of poetry.

**RADOVAN VUČKOVIĆ** (Trijebine near Sjenica, 1935 – Belgrade, 2016) was a writer, historian of literature, expert in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Yugoslavia's and Serbian literature, advisor at the Institute of Literature and Art in Belgrade, professor of the Faculty of Philology in Banjaluka and full member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of Srpska (elected in 1997). He wrote studies, essays and reviews in the field of literature, short-form

fiction, travelogues and a novel. Books published: *Sudbina kritičara* [The Critic's Destiny, 1968]; *Preobražaji i preobraženja (o Antunu Branku Šimiću)* [Metamorphoses and Transfigurations: About Antun Branko Šimić, 1969]; *Književne analize* [Literary Analyses, 1972]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 1* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. 1, 1974]; *Velika sinteza: (o Ivi Andriću)* [A Major Synthesis: About Ivo Andrić], 1974]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 2* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. 2, 1976]; *Poetika hrvatskog i srpskog ekspressionizma* [The Poetics of the Croatian and Serbian Expressionism, 1979]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 3* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. 3, 1979]; *Danica i druge zvijezde* [Morning and Other Stars, 1980]; *Lude gljive* [Magic Mushrooms, 1981]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 4* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. 4, 1981]; *Moderna drama* [The Modern Drama, 1982]; *Avanguardna poezija* [Avant-Garde Poetry, 1984]; *Krležina dela* [Krleža's Works, 1986]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 5* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. I, 1988]; *Od Čorovića do Ćopića* [From Čorović to Ćopić, 1989]; *Moderna srpska proza; kraj XIX i početak XX vela* [Modern Serbian Fiction: Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, 1990]; *Živa grobnica* [The Live Sepulchre, 1990]; *Razvoj novije književnosti* [The Development of Recent Literature, 1991]; *Zbogom, Sarajevo* [Good-Bye, Sarajevo, 1994]; *Tumaranja* [Roaming Around, 1995]; *Sarajevske ratne priče* [War Stories from Sarajevo, 1997]; *Priče sarajevskih izbeglica* [The Stories by the Refugees from Sarajevo, 1998]; *Srpska avanguardna proza* [The Serbian Avant-Garde Fiction, 2000]; *Andrić: istorija i ličnost* [Andrić: History and Personality, 2002]; *U nevremenu: dnevnički zapisi* [During Stormy Days: Diary Entries, 2004]; *U znaku tradicije i avangarde* [Marked by Tradition and the Avant-Garde, 2004]; *Moderni roman dvadesetog veka* [The Modern Twentieth-Century Novel, 2005]; *Tumaranja* [Roaming Around, 2005]; *Andrić: paralele i recepcija* [Andrić: Some Parallels and Reception, 2006]; *Vojvodanska književna avangarda* [The Literary Avant-Garde of Vojvodina, 2006]; *Život i poezija Mubere Pašić* [The Life and Poetry of Mubera Pašić, 2007]; *Pisac, delo, čitalac* [The Writer, the Work, the Reader, 2007]; *Paralele i ukrštanja* [Parallels and Intersections, 2009]; *Čitanje gradova: dnevnik putovanja* [Reading the Cities: A Travel Diary, 2010]; *Poetika srpske avangarde: (Ekspresionizam)* [The Poetics of the Serbian Avant-Garde: Expressionism, 2011]; *Poezija srpske avangarde* [The Poetry of the Serbian Avant-Garde, 2011]; *Proza srpske avangarde* [The Fiction of the Serbian Avant-Garde, 2011]; *Smrt, budjenje* [Death, Awakening, 2011]; *Velika sinteza: o Ivi Andriću* [A Major Synthesis: About Ivo Andrić], 2011]; *Problemi, pisci i dela, knj. 6* [Problems, Authors and Works, Vol. 6, 2012]; *Put na istok: dnevnik putovanja* [An Eastbound Journey: A Travel Diary, 2012]; *Moderni roman dvadesetog veka* [The Modern Twentieth-Century Novel, 2013]; *Likovi žena u Andrićevom delu* [Female Characters in Andrić's Work, 2014]; *Književno delo Miloša Crnjanskog* [The Literary Oeuvre

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*Collected and prepared by  
Svetlana MILAŠINOVIC*

Translated from the Serbian by  
*Angelina ČANKOVIĆ POPOVIĆ*



## LITERARY LINKS OF MATICA SRPSKA

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*Computer layout*

Vladimir Vatić, GRAFIT, Petrovaradin

*Printed by*

SAJNOS, Novi Sad

*Circulation*

500 copies

CIP – Каталогизација у публикацији  
Библиотека Матице српске, Нови Сад

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**LITERARY links of Matica srpska** / editor-in-chief Ivan Negrišorac. – 2017, 1- . – Novi Sad : Matica srpska, 2017- .  
– 24 cm

Godišnje.

ISSN 2619-9971

COBISS.SR-ID 322395911